



Watching a World in Motion: Reflections on the IS Academy Project

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Introduction

International migration is frequently discussed in terms of development. We often hear that there are some 214 million international migrants, and that one in seven people is a migrant when internal mobility is included. These migrants, say the World Bank, will send more than half a billion US dollars in remittances this year, the lion's share going to developing countries. Beyond the numbers, however, lies a complex and messy reality, one that cannot be enumerated and that calls

for urgent policy responses at all levels of government. From the deaths of migrants crossing the desert in Niger, to reports of migrant abuse in the Middle East, to the portability of social protection rights accumulated by labour migrants across the world, the IS Academy Final Conference, held by UNU-MERIT and its School of Governance from 22-24 January 2014, delved deeper into the complex relationships between migration and development.

Linking migration and development

Policies aimed at migrants tend to frame migration as a tool for development. The policy debate on migration and development has long focused on three key areas: remittances, diaspora engagement and the highly skilled (and to some extent, return). Remittances – the flows of financial and socio-cultural capital from destination countries – are viewed as potential resources that can encourage development in origin and third countries. Migrants also transfer knowledge and other forms of capital upon return to their country of origin or when moving to third countries; however, return in its purest form is not required for this knowledge transfer. Diaspora engagement has become a key policy tool through which governments seek to counter 'brain drain' and encourage origin country development, particularly through their targeting of highly skilled migrants.

Undoubtedly migration can and does have positive outcomes, as shown by the evidence. However, as Hein de Haas posited in his final keynote speech, discussions on migration and development swing backwards and forwards between positive and negative accounts of the impacts of migration on development. De Haas argued that the positive attitude towards migration as a tool for development, prevailing in recent years, may not be purely evidence-based but also influenced by ideological, political and academic trends and

that we need a more nuanced approach to looking at the linkages between migration and development.

The world's most developed economies are experiencing tightened national budgets for foreign aid and investment, as well as high unemployment and public scepticism about overseas interventions. In this context, positivity towards "helping migrants to help themselves" fits well with the objectives of policymakers. This approach may have considerable benefits, yet the question remains as to whether this "neo-liberal" discourse downplays the importance of states' obligations to maintain institutional structures that allow for positive change to occur.

Rethinking remittances and return migration

Remittances continue to attract considerable scholarly attention, yet there is little consensus as to their impact beyond reducing poverty. On the micro level, remittances can be an important livelihood strategy for individuals and their households and can also be a possible driver of economic growth on the macroeconomic level. Conversely, however, remittances may also encourage dependency reducing incentives to work and, in extreme circumstances, lead to "Dutch Disease". Many studies suggest that highly skilled migrants and those from richer households are more



successful at remitting and remit larger amounts. From a policy perspective this is important: remittances may represent net growth for an economy but they may also widen inequality. More nuanced perspectives of remittances that go beyond emphasizing the positive effects of remittances as a policy instrument for development are clearly needed.

One debate within academia seeks to understand the conditions under which remittances are used for consumption or investment. The subject of remittance usage attracted several presentations uncovering the mechanisms leading to different remittance-spending behaviours. Evidence was presented from a panel study in Ethiopia showing that international remittances stimulated private transfers. This suggests the use of remittances for exchange, altruism or the paying back of informal loans but does not support the view that remittances are used for insurance. However, another study, using IS Academy data in Burundi, showed that in a post-conflict context remittances were used more for insurance than for investment. In her opening keynote address, Melissa Siegel reflected on the predominant use of remittances for consumption-smoothing among households in all of the countries studied in the IS Academy project.

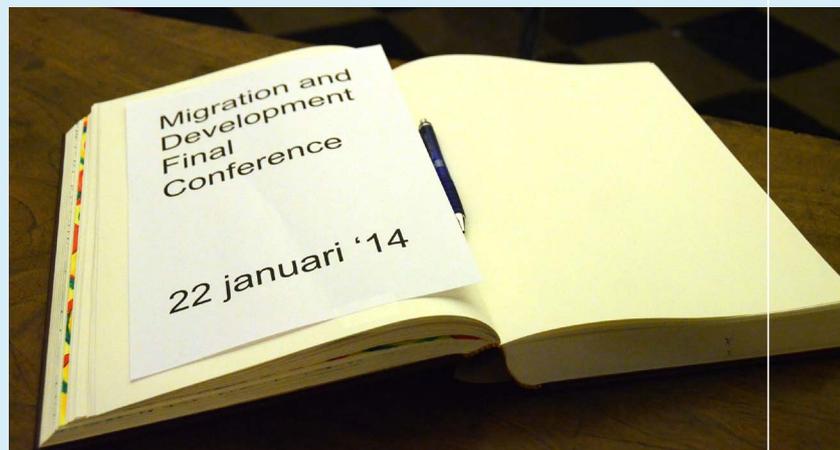
An implicit judgement often made in this debate is that investment in productive assets is a more “desirable” use of remittances than consumption-smoothing. Furthermore there is often a normative expectation that remittances should be used productively rather than “squandered” on consumer assets, while in reality the opportunities for investment, particularly financial and productive asset investment, are scarce. Investment is only possible if there is a legitimate, accountable and robust financial sector already in place and that more basic needs are met first.

Central to the remittances debate is also the question of whether remittances improve wellbeing or lead to an undesirable culture of dependency. Again the assumption is made that spending remittances on daily consumption contributes less to community or national development than investment in, for example, human capital production. IS Academy data from Ethiopia was used to understand the link between remittances and wellbeing, with a focus on the role played by investment in assets. Findings indicate that receiving remittances increases wellbeing, while migration without remittances has no such effect. Findings presented from Moldova and Georgia also show a positive association between remittances and wellbeing. While exceptional situations such as hyperinflation may arise due to remittances, the consensus is that on the household level remittances have considerable benefits for wellbeing.

Structural constraints and policy intentions

Similarly, several studies on return migration stressed the power of structures and norms in determining how return is experienced by migrants and the communities to which they return. Several studies provided evidence that return migrants in post-conflict areas seem to fare as well, and in some cases better, than non-returnees. However it was noted that this “successful” reintegration story is fairly meaningless in development terms if we fail to acknowledge that there is still widespread vulnerability: there are bigger and more serious causes of vulnerability than migration. Lost trust in communities is a problem as is lost social capital because some goods and services cannot be accessed through financial capital alone. Inadequate infrastructure, corruption and lack of rights and protections from the state are just some of the factors which have a profound limiting effect on the power of remittances and return migration to bring about positive change.

These structural constraints (partially) explain why we tend not to see remittances used for productive investment. However, another explanation is that the way in which we measure productive investments is not necessarily appropriate. There may be a lack of opportunity to purchase productive assets and make investments. It may also be the case that consumer spending is valued more, or indeed less, highly by individuals than Western economists assume. This is particularly likely to be the case in conflict- or post-conflict zones and states where property rights are non-existent or poorly enforced and where long-term planning is not an option due to political instability. In a study of Afghan returnees, the intention to migrate again was prevalent among returnees, particularly those who had returned involuntarily, discouraging any kind of investment in Afghanistan.





What are the drivers of transnational behaviour?

The complex link between the economic and social implications of migration for development was also evident in the presentations and discussions on transnationalism. If a migrant is transnational then this means that he or she has strong ties to their country of residence *and* to their origin, or another, location. A key question in the study of transnationalism relates to whether integration in one society substitutes or complements integration in another. The evidence presented offered more support for the complementarity theory. Findings from IS Academy data showed that social integration among migrants in the Netherlands is not linked to the likelihood of them sending remittances; however, economic integration (having a stable job) is associated with being more likely to remit and send large quantities. The study also noted that there appears to be compatibility between multiple identities in the sense that migrants can split their time and focus between co-ethnics and their host society.

There may be some overlap where migrants both maintain contact and integrate in the destination country, but it is the *reason for and nature of the contact* that tells us what the migrant is gaining or lacking in each type of interaction. Another study explained how the sending of financial remittances can be used to achieve social visibility in the origin country and that such remittances may in fact compensate for a migrant's feeling of "invisibility" in the destination.

Evidence was also presented supporting the theory of reactive transnationalism, whereby social status is pursued in the origin country in response to experiencing discrimination in the destination. Such instances illustrate the complexity of the link between integration in destination and origin contexts, which is particularly relevant for policies targeting diasporas.

With this in mind, diaspora engagement policy often fails to reflect the needs of diasporas and the complex reasons for which they engage or forego engagement with their countries of origin. Transnationalism on a personal level may reflect family and household preferences rather than any attachment between the migrant and the state as a political or cultural entity. A study of the Pakistani diaspora highlighted the possibility that engagement policies might only reach those who are already the most engaged. One study found that migrants' desire to stay in touch with individuals in their home country is unrelated to their potential to contribute to economic development. Even in relatively poor households, remittances may be sent specifically to pay for an internet connection so as to enable video calling.

These points suggest a need to rethink some of the terminology used in migration and development studies and to nuance the concepts that shape policymaking in this area, it is often not the case of either-or impacts.

Nuancing the migration discourse

It was noted throughout the conference that language used in migration research is too simplistic, and often dualistic, which may limit our understanding of some complex processes. In her keynote speech, Melissa Siegel stressed that, within the IS Academy data, each country context has a unique migration story and that generalizable findings are unusual. Carlos Vargas-Silva expanded on this, questioning the accuracy of categorizing migration flows into voluntary and involuntary. He presented early research into the economic impacts of forced migration and noted that there is often some element of choice or agency in migration that we would consider forced. Policymaking which classifies migrants using a binary distinction based on force may not strike the nuances of a policy problem.

Prof. Ronald Skeldon went on to question the usefulness of viewing highly skilled migration and low and medium-skilled migration as being separate and unique flows. Highly skilled migrants are often deemed the most desirable and as a result they tend to enjoy more rights and privileges than other migrants. Yet, knowledge-based economies need service workers and the migration of workers for these low and medium skilled jobs is vital, particularly for ageing societies. Prof. Skeldon argued for an acknowledgement of the reality of mixed migration flows, particularly in the context of highly skilled migration. If economies want to remain competitive and attract the highly skilled with generous family reunification rights then the parallel migration of workers of other skill levels, as well as dependents, is unavoidable. This is because the highly skilled will need the services of the lower skilled to enable them to do their jobs.

It was also questioned whether the polarization of states into a Global North and South is a useful distinction to make, given that development is a spectrum. Even to view development as a continuum in this manner is to impose a certain normative paradigm on the development process. If migration and development policy is framed in overly simplistic terms then in a sense it may be fated to fail. Hein de Haas also presented findings from a study into the impact of visa restrictions on migration flows, noting that although restrictive visa policies help limit in-flows, they also stop out-flows. This highlights the limitations of distinguishing between permanent and temporary migration. Migrants may not have a concrete idea of how long they intend to stay in the destination, but the possibility of not being able to return if they leave may encourage permanent stay.

The gendered impact of migration policy

Migration affects men and women differently; as such, migration policy should recognize migration as a gendered phenomenon. In many contexts, men and women have different opportunities for migration and make different choices as to their destination. IS Academy data showed that destination preferences for male and female migrants are very different and follow the availability of employment for both sexes. In Ethiopia, female returnees have worse outcomes than males in terms of labour market reintegration and subjective wellbeing, even when returning from the same destination. Vulnerability during the migration experience may offer a partial explanation but wider structure constraints such as a gender segregated industrial sector and the unequal division of child-rearing duties also contribute to different outcomes



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for men and women. Prof. Valentina Mazzucato, in her keynote address, referred to her work with Ghanaian migrant parents to highlight that mothers reported worse subjective wellbeing than migrant fathers as a result of separation from their children.

With regard to family members left behind by migrants, the conference served to highlight differences in the way that boys and girls experience the absence of one or more parents. One study indicated that boys with a parent abroad exhibit more behavioural abnormalities than their male peers but no differences in terms of emotional wellbeing; for girls with a parent abroad the opposite was true, with emotional wellbeing being lower than for their female peers. These results are policy-relevant because they confirm how behavioural responses to situations are conditioned by societal expectations and norms. Policies targeted at migrants will often affect men and women differently and will also have nuanced effects on the children and other family members left behind by migrants.

Alternatives to a state-centred approach?

The final discussion on the migration and development discourse focused on the state-centred approach and its questionable relevance in some contexts. It was noted that internal remittances are in many cases received by more

households than international remittances, even if they tend to be smaller in terms of the total amount. Rural to urban internal migration often precedes international migration and, particularly in the case of the highly skilled, migrants often come from very specific locales within a country. The question which follows is whether the focus of the migration and development debate could or should shift to these micro-economies rather than the country as a whole.

Another possible threat to the relevance of a state-centred approach is the increasing importance of multinational companies and international organizations in the governance of migration. In some developed countries, border controls are increasingly outsourced to private firms, with implications for which actor should be the focus of research. The “migration industry” is also predominantly located within the private and NGO sectors, with Western Union, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) being powerful shapers of migrant flows and behaviours.

The conference also debated the EU’s external migration policy, which was a focus of the IS Academy project. Here it was noted that some of the EU’s policy instruments, such as Mobility Partnerships, lack substance because they are not universally adopted across the Union. Overlap and inconsistency within regional policy are evidence that it is too early to be shifting focus away from states and onto supranational institutions.



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Recommendations

The points raised in this brief offer some material for reflection as we look towards the future of migration and development research and to the shaping of policy in this area. It is clear that we need to be changing the questions that are asked in the debate. It is not whether migration is “good” or “bad” but *under what conditions do we see positive outcomes and under what conditions do we see negative outcomes?* The conference saw many policy recommendations, including how research can improve our understanding of migration and development. In sum:

- **The need for more data.** Few topics within migration studies have reached saturation and given the inherently dynamic nature of migration, there is always need for more good quality data to test our understanding. The possible added value of multi-sited research is also something for research commissioners to take into consideration. Explorative studies and the collection of data that is not necessarily “policy relevant” at a specific moment in time also increase our understanding of these topics.
- **Careful appraisal of the relevance of terminology and discourse.** The established terminology of migration may not adequately describe every situation. The discourse of migration and development is often implicitly value-laden and influenced by academic trends and ideologies. A discussion that is capable of acknowledging nuances and complexities is needed to fully understand these complex processes.
- **The importance of detail as well as broad pictures.** Rather than asking “yes” or “no” questions it is more useful to examine the conditions that lead to given outcomes. All studies are context-specific and although we can broadly control for this, results are rarely generalizable. A focus on understanding the intricacies of specific events can be a useful complement to research that seeks broadly applicable conclusions.
- **Realistic expectations for migration policy.** Migrants are capable of bringing positive change to destination and origin sites but their agency is not limitless. Policy expectations and academic research should be mindful of the constraining structures within which migrants and their households operate and acknowledge the role that states and other institutions can play in lifting barriers to development.



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About the project

The IS Academy Migration and Development final conference was the culmination of a five-year research project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented by Maastricht University and its partners. The project involved survey data collection in five sites – Afghanistan, Burundi, Ethiopia, Morocco and the Netherlands – and focused on the key themes of remittances, return migration, the highly skilled and the external dimension of EU mobility policy.

For more information on the IS Academy Migration and Development project and for links to all IS Academy publications please visit <http://www.merit.unu.edu/themes/6-migration-and-development/is-academy/>. For more information on the conference, including video recordings of the keynote addresses, visit <http://www.merit.unu.edu/conference-is-academy-migration-and-development/>.

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