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## **Migration and Development: A Multilevel Perspective to Data Collection**

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### ***Introduction***

As the impact of internal and international migration is felt in both developed and less developed countries, migration has come to the forefront of academic and policy discussions. The debate has centered upon the interdependence between migration and its economic, sociological and political impacts in both sending and receiving societies. Although there have been numerous attempts to consolidate the relationship between migration and development, work in this vein has generated diverse and in some cases competing perspectives that yield a wide number of testable hypotheses which concentrate on particular aspects of the phenomenon.

This essay focuses on the issue of migration and development by discussing some of the practical and theoretical foundations needed for a comprehensive, valid and reliable data collection program that incorporates both international migration and development data throughout different levels of analysis, that is, from a multilevel perspective.

In what follows, this essay discusses where we are and where we want to go in terms of data collection vis-à-vis migration and development. Next, it briefly analyzes the micro and macro approaches to the study of international migration and its developmental consequences followed by a succinct discussion on the rationale for why a multilevel approach is needed to gauge the potential impacts of migration on development. Finally, this essay concludes with some recommendations for the international community to consider in terms of the priority areas for data collection and research and in terms of how current data collection efforts could be utilized in the short term to enhance our understanding of such a complex phenomenon.

### ***Where are we? And where do we want to go?***

Recent efforts such as UNDP's 2009 Human Development Report, the World Bank's *Migration and Remittances Factbook* and *Migrants Count: Five Steps Toward Better Migration Data* in addition to long established and ground breaking data collection programs like the *Mexican Migration Project* (MMP) and the *Latin American Migration Project* (LAMP), among others, constitute the starting points for future data collection efforts.

UNDP's Human Development Index and the World Bank's data on international migration and remittances are excellent sources for aggregate-level data analysis, however, at these levels of aggregation, migration's individual-level developmental impacts are impossible to obtain. *Migrants Count*, on the other hand, provides five basic recommendations that no doubt will significantly improve international migration data in the short run; however much more detailed guidance is needed in terms of sampling strategies, target populations (definitional aspects), as well as how to construct comparison groups of non-migrants in order to attain reliable and valid data within and across countries.

In terms of future data collection endeavors, it is important to highlight, however, that special attention should be paid to how international migration and development are conceptualized since their meaning will influence what measures will be appropriate to weigh their association. In this regard, *Migrants Count* suggests incorporating a set of questions that encompass the basic spatio-temporal dimensions of migration. This series of questions, however, should be complemented by questions that take into account the basic and dynamic characteristics of each country's migratory system (CDG 2009: 20-21).

With respect to the outcome variable, that is, development, it tends to be a more contentious concept and as a result, a more encompassing measure needs to be adopted. It also seems that more often than not remittances are used as a proxy of development. Certainly remittances help to abate further impoverishment and increase access to health and education, which in turn potentially increases a country's developmental prospects (if the necessary conditions are in place, see below). However, remittances per se, are not our measure of success. Remittances should be viewed as a supplement and not as a substitute of government policies and institutional frameworks to promote development. Data collection efforts, thus, should focus on complementing current efforts such as the Human Development Index by expanding its geographic disaggregation at different levels of analysis.

### ***Micro and Macro Approaches: Theoretical Considerations<sup>1</sup>***

There are at least three theoretical perspectives from which international migration and development is assessed. On the one hand, some literature argues that international migration hinders development due to the loss of the most productive and qualified members of the labor force; in contrast, others argue that international migration stimulates development primarily through the impact of remittances both at the individual and national level. Finally, a third perspective attempts to reconcile these two common but independent perspectives by highlighting that the impact of migration on development depends on a country's developmental-state and on the time frame, that is, on the short or long terms.

It is now, widely accepted, at least at the theoretical level, that migration will promote development if the sending country has a set of characteristics that maximize migration's potential developmental effects such as a diverse economic structure, adequate human capital, a solid legal system, a functioning financial system that channel remittances to productive uses, a fair distribution of the national income, and political and social stability (Hermele 1997). In the short run, development will stimulate migration, analogous to an income effect (more disposable income allows individuals to bear some of the costs associated with the movement), as the opportunity structure (i.e. economic, social and political) widens in the long-term. However, remaining in the home country may become more attractive or less costly both in economic and psychosocial terms, and thus under this premise migration potentially becomes more of an option rather than a survival strategy.

Surprisingly, none of these perspectives explicitly take into account migration's potential developmental impacts at different levels of analysis from a unified spatial perspective. The main reason for this is the lack of appropriate data that would allow us to explore the interconnectedness between migration and development from a multilevel perspective. There are many reasons behind the disconnection between micro and macro theories. One reason for this detachment is the prevailing use of different units of analysis. This generates "diverse lines of inquiry that have lead to alternate and frequently incompatible conceptualizations of migration as an event" (Shaw 1975: 3) and therefore incompatible conceptualizations of its potential impacts on development.

Micro-level theories' unit of analysis is the individual. Micro-level theories do not provide us with a comprehensive treatment of how the characteristics of place of origin or destination influence migration nor of the interdependence between migration and other socioeconomic processes such as the changes of status that relate to an individual and his/her environment. In other words, micro-level theories focus on

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<sup>1</sup> For comprehensive reviews see, for example, Brettell and Hollifield (2000) and Massey (1994, 1999).

the role of economics, family ties and networks, among other factors that underlay the decision by a potential migrant to remain in a current place or to migrate to another. Micro-level theories largely concentrate on the impact of remittances at the household level in terms of human capital formation and basic consumption needs.

Macro-level perspectives, those that use aggregate factors as their unit of analysis, relate to collective moves and are more appropriate for characterizing migration in aggregate terms. In addition, macro-level theories only allow relatively crude explanations of lifecycle characteristics and individual job skills. In terms of migration's developmental impact, macro-level theories concentrate on remittances and their impact for instance on the balance of payments, foreign exchange, and their multiplier effect. None of these approaches pay explicit and significant attention to other potential variables that may shape migration decisions and their impact on development, such as the distribution of governmental transfers, education, health, and even infrastructure policies at the community and sub-national level.

Given that migration is a social phenomenon that is unique in its demographic composition, its forms (permanent, temporal, documented, undocumented, refugee, asylum, displaced, etc.), and in its temporal and spatial dimensions, designing a unique and universally applicable typology of migration's developmental impacts may prove to be a difficult task due to the great variation that exists not only between countries but also within countries. Traditional approaches for measuring development, such as income (PPP), GDP, etc., are far too narrow indicators that mask the multitude of mechanisms by which migration could potentially affect development. Alternatively, a broad conceptualization of development in terms of wellbeing enables us to overcome these theoretical and practical difficulties. Wellbeing, which refers to quality of life<sup>2</sup>, could be measured using a variety of material and immaterial indicators including psychological, income, health, and education, at different levels of analysis. This would portray a much more complete picture of the phenomenon and its potential causal mechanisms, and consequently better inform policy designs.

### ***A multilevel approach to data collection***

Why a multilevel approach to the study of international migration and development? Little attention over the past decades has been paid to the impacts of migration on the left-behind, in particular to women and children, their families, and communities of origin, from a holistic perspective, that is, a perspective that weighs migration's developmental potentials in both economic and non-economic terms at different levels of analysis. Current approaches tend to concentrate on particular aspects of the interconnectedness between migration and development and do not take into account the interactions that exist between individuals and the environments in which they live.

A multilevel approach incorporates intermediate levels of analysis to gauge the potential impacts of migration on development, beyond traditional micro and macro approaches, and provides us with a reasonable way of organizing the contextual effects that mediate between these levels.

What do these levels refer to? The micro level refers to the individual or household. The meso (the community) level refers to interactions between or among households within their most immediate economic and social space. The exo level (the subnational level) represents states in a federal system or regions in a unitary system that indirectly impact the micro level units (households) through the meso level (local communities). The macro level corresponds to the outermost level where the national state is located and where national policies originate.

Above all, the main purpose is to investigate the interactions and interdependences within and between the different levels. A household is likely to have interactions with other micro-level households at the meso level providing social and economic support to each other. One way to measure these interactions is to look at the number of schools, churches, and community centers as indicators of structured social interactions in a particular community. What types of relations exist between sub-national units, (the exo

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<sup>2</sup> See Sen (1999) and Dasgupta (2001) for a discussion.

level) and households? Depending on the socioeconomic characteristics of the household, different policies and institutional initiatives filter down to the micro level and have a direct or indirect impact on migration as well as on developmental outcomes. For example, if the analysis is made in an urban setting, changing conditions in the workplace are going to affect, to some extent, micro-level decisions. In contrast, if the analysis is made in a rural setting, changing climate conditions may shape migration decisions at the micro-level as well as the channels by which remittances could be directed as well as their developmental impacts on family members left-behind and their communities. The exo level is also going to have an impact on the meso level through subnational state policies. Interaction with the macro level is not as indirect as it is sometimes assumed. Here, national state policies are going to shape each of the other levels.

**Priority areas for future data collection and research for the international community to consider**

What are the main areas for future data collection and research? What can we do in order to maximize current data collection efforts in the short-run? Table 1<sup>3</sup> illustrates some of the important domains and example items that could be included in future data collection efforts in order to increase the coverage and scope of the data.

Table 1. Multilevel domains for data collection

Domain	Example Items	Level
Material wellbeing	Food, housing, income	Micro
Subjective wellbeing	Life satisfaction	Micro
Health	Health and health infrastructure	Micro, meso, exo
Education	Education and education infrastructure	Micro, meso, exo
Productivity	Work, labour market characteristics	Micro, meso, exo
Security	Physical safety, Neighbourhood characteristics	Micro, meso, exo
Social protection	Social capital, Cash transfer programs	Meso, Exo
Political economy	Macroeconomic condition	Macro

The most relevant characteristics of Table 1 are the conception of the impacts of migration on development from a multilevel spatial classification and the inclusion of both economic and psychosocial indicators to weigh migration’s impact on development. This classification permits us to disaggregate some of the intervening variables to further understand migration’s potential developmental impacts, emphasizing that its potential effects are far more complex than a simple micro/macro dichotomy.

**Recommendations for joint action in the short term**

What can we do in order to maximize current data collection efforts in the short-run?

- When possible, merge individual-level data from household surveys (World Bank’s migration surveys, LSMS, DHS, MMP, LAMP, etc.) with UNDP’s Human Development Index in order to provide a more nuanced and contextualized perspective of the potential impacts of migration on development.
- Create a global repository of individual-level international migration data to promote interdisciplinary research and analysis as the basis of evidence based policy making.
- Support the GFMD’s Working Group on Policy Coherence, Data and Research in establishing specific institutional partnerships with researchers, think tanks and universities in order to produce research and analysis that makes use and takes advantage of current data. At a minimum, it is necessary to focus on the most vulnerable groups from a gender and age perspective such as children and women, from economic and psychosocial angles.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Samman (2007)

- Include internal and South-South migration as a key developmental dimensions.

### **Questions for discussion**

- What is the roadmap for the next three years in terms of data collection, research and analysis?
- What are the main questions that we would like to answer? And what type of data do we need to answer those questions?
- What set of positive and negative externalities would we like to maximize and minimize, respectively in both sending and receiving societies?

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