Over the last decade, a number of high-income destination countries have developed programs aimed at tackling the “root causes” of migration, especially irregular and high-risk migration. These initiatives are premised on the notion that development in the origin country would help reduce the number of emigrants. That notion has been subject to debate, however, with some observers suggesting that development would actually increase emigration.

Development and the propensity to migrate

The propensity to migrate is driven by many factors. Two are closely related to development in the country of origin: (1) the income gap with potential destination countries and (2) the availability of financial resources for would-be migrants to move to these destination countries. If the origin country grows at a sufficiently rapid pace and the income gap with potential destination countries shrinks, people will have domestic alternatives to improve their lives, making emigration less attractive. But they will also have more resources, making migration more affordable. These forces pull in opposite directions. The overall impact of development on migration depends on which forces dominate.

Economic development also alters the destinations of migrants. With economic development, people have more resources to finance their migration, and therefore they have a larger choice of destination countries. They also tend to have higher skills, and they are often better received in destination countries. On the other hand, development reduces the incentives to migrate to destinations where the gains will be limited—for example, if people from low-income countries move to other low-income countries.

Empirical patterns

The “migration hump”

Upper-middle-income countries have the highest ratio of emigrants to population (figure S8.1). In 2020, less than 1 percent of the population of low- and lower-middle-income countries such as Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Tanzania, as well as high-income countries such as Japan, Qatar, and the United States, lived abroad. By contrast, countries at intermediate levels of income, such as Albania and the Dominican Republic, had the highest emigration rates.

This pattern has been variously labeled the mobility transition, the emigration life cycle, and the migration hump. It is consistent with the channels through which development affects the propensity to emigrate. People from middle-income countries have both the incentives to move—which are typically greater than for people from high-income countries—and the means to do so—unlike many people in low-income countries.
The migration hump, however, is closely linked to the size of the country of origin (figure S8.2). It is very pronounced in countries with smaller populations (half of countries, which together account for 3.5 percent of the global population). It is, however, more muted for countries with larger populations (accounting for 96.5 percent of the global population)—until they reach upper-middle-income levels, at which point emigration rates decline. For example, the emigration rate in The Gambia, with its smaller population, is 60 percent higher than that in neighboring Guinea or Senegal, which have larger populations. Among upper-middle-income countries, the emigration rate of Uruguay, with its smaller population, is about four times higher than that of Argentina, which has a larger population.

Once again, this pattern is consistent with the channels through which development affects the propensity to emigrate. Domestic alternatives to cross-border migration reduce the incentives to migrate across borders. As larger countries develop, new opportunities emerge, including for internal migration toward, for example, a more prosperous province or a booming urban center, while such opportunities may not exist in smaller economies.

**Figure S8.1** The propensity to emigrate is highest in middle-income countries

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**Note:** The figure plots the relationship between the total number of emigrants (as a percentage of the sending country population) in 2020 against GDP per capita in constant 2017 US dollars in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms in 2020. GDP for 2020 is calculated by applying the local currency real GDP growth rate for 2019–20 to 2019 GDP from Penn World Table 10.0. GDP per capita is capped at US$84,000 in the figure.

**Size of the country of origin**

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Increasing propensity to migrate from middle-income countries

The migration hump provides a static perspective. It compares the propensity to migrate across countries that are at various levels of income today. However, as countries develop, say from low- to middle-income, their emigration patterns do not necessarily adjust accordingly. Therefore, to inform the debate on development and the root causes of migration, an additional perspective is needed that looks at what happens in a country when its level of income rises.7

From a review of emigration trends in what were middle-income countries in 1960, three key patterns emerged:

- As middle-income countries developed, emigration steadily increased. The trend continued until income reached about upper-middle-income levels—US$13,000, adjusted for purchasing power parity (figure S8.3, panel a).8 In many of these countries, however, development was also accompanied by a decline in fertility rates, which reduced the effect of development on actual emigration flows.
The differences between countries based on their size remained. Larger middle-income countries experienced a smaller rise in emigration rates, compared with smaller middle-income countries.

Migration from middle-income countries also became increasingly directed toward higher-income destinations, which accounted for most of the increase in the propensity to emigrate (figure S8.3, panel b). By contrast, the propensity to emigrate to other destinations—to neighboring or low-income countries—remained largely unchanged. This effect is more apparent in smaller countries than in those with a larger population.

Declining propensity to migrate from low-income countries

A similar review of the experience of countries in the low range of the income distribution in 1960 highlights different patterns:
As countries that were low-income circa 1960 developed, emigration initially declined (figure S8.4, panel a) until their per capita incomes tripled, which took, on average, about 40 years. Emigration rates then followed the pattern observed in middle-income countries, increasing steadily until upper-middle-income levels. If low- and lower-middle-income countries—which account for about 27 percent of today's global population—grew at the same rate today as they did between 2000 and 2020, it would take them, on average, another 32 years to reach the average income level around which the migration rate peaks.

Among lower-income countries as well the effects are significantly larger in countries with smaller populations and much more limited in countries with larger ones.

The decline in emigration rates was driven largely by a reduction of emigration to other lower-income countries (figure S8.4, panel b). Emigration to high-income destinations remained stable, at a low level, until countries reached middle-income levels, at which point migration trends became similar to those of other middle-income countries. By the time the income of low-income countries had tripled, emigration to high-income countries had increased by only 0.7 percentage point.
Notes


2. For example, in low-income countries visa costs are higher for travelers to high-income destinations. According to Ortega and Peri (2013), migration flows to member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are very responsive to immigration policies.

3. Robust evidence in the literature reveals that reduction of financing constraints encourages migration. Angelucci (2016) and Gazeaud, Mvukiyehe, and Sterck (2023) find that cash transfer programs in Mexico and the Comoros increase international migration, and Bazzi (2017) and Shrestha (2017) find that higher rainfall, which raises agricultural incomes, increases international migration from Indonesia and Nepal.


5. Clemens (2020); Hatton and Williamson (1994).


7. Clemens (2020). Interpreting trends over long periods of time also raises challenges because geopolitical shifts (such as the end of the Cold War) and technological advances (which have reduced travel costs) have transformed migration dynamics across the world.

8. The baseline year for each country is the year in which GDP per capita (US$, 2017 PPP) was at its lowest level between 1960 and 2020. Countries designated as middle-income had an average initial GDP per capita of US$3,353 (2017 PPP).

9. Countries designated as low-income had an average initial GDP per capita of US$1,165 (2017 PPP).

References


