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## **The determinants of international migration**

Conceptualizing policy, origin and destination effects

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**DEMIG**

The Determinants  
of International  
Migration

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### Abstract

The effectiveness of migration policies has been widely contested in the face of their supposed failure to steer immigration and their hypothesized unintended, counter-productive effects. However, due to fundamental methodological and conceptual limitations, evidence has remained inconclusive. While the migration policy research is often descriptive and receiving-country biased, migration determinants research tends to be based on obsolete, theoretically void push-pull and gravity models which tend to omit crucial non-economic, sending-country and policy factors. More fundamentally, this state-of-the-art reveals a still limited understanding of the forces driving migration. Although there is consensus that macro-contextual economic and political factors and meso-level factors such as networks all play 'some' role, there is no agreement on their relative weight and mutual interaction. To start filling that gap, this paper outlines the contours of a conceptual framework for generating improved insights into the ways states and policies shape migration processes in their interaction with structural migration determinants in receiving and sending countries. First, it argues that the fragmented insights from different disciplinary theories can be integrated in one framework through conceptualizing virtually all forms of migration as a function of *capabilities* and *aspirations*. Second, to increase conceptual clarity it distinguishes the preponderant role of *states* in migration processes from the hypothetically more marginal role of specific *immigration* and *emigration policies*. Subsequently, it hypothesizes four different (spatial, categorical, inter-temporal, reverse flow) 'substitution effects' which can partly explain why policies fail to meet their objectives. This framework will serve as a conceptual guide for the DEMIG (The Determinants of International Migration) research project.

**Keywords:** migration, migration determinants, theory, structure, agency, migration policy, states, effectiveness, substitution effects

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

How do the migration policies of receiving and sending states affect the size, direction and nature of international migration? This is the central question addressed by the DEMIG research project (The Determinants of International Migration: A theoretical and empirical assessment of policy, origin, and destination effects). This project aims to generate new theoretical and empirical insights into the way states and policies shape migration processes in their interaction with other migration determinants in receiving and sending countries. First, this paper outlines the scientific rationale of this project by analysing the main gaps in migration policy and migration determinants research. Second, it outlines the contours of a conceptual framework and a set of hypotheses for generating improved insights into the ways states and policies shape migration processes in their interaction with structural migration determinants in receiving and sending countries, which will guide the DEMIG project.

In wealthy countries, immigration, in particular of low-skilled and culturally distinct people from poorer countries, is increasingly perceived as a problem in need of control. The common – but not unproblematic – perception is that policy-makers have reacted to this pressure by implementing restrictive immigration policies and increasing border controls (Castles and Miller 2009; Massey et al. 1998). However, the effectiveness of such policies has been often contested in the face of their oft-supposed failure to significantly affect the level of immigration and their hypothesized unintended, perverse and often counter-productive effects such as pushing migrants into permanent settlement, discouraging return and encouraging irregular movements and migration through alternative legal or geographical channels (Castles 2004b; de Haas 2007; Grüters 2003). However, other scholars have argued that, on the whole, state policies have been largely effective (Brochmann and Hammar 1999; Collyer 2006; Strikwerda 1999), which also seems to be partly confirmed by a limited number of quantitative studies indicating that specific policy interventions can have a significant effect on migration flows (Czaika and de Haas 2011a).

Despite apparently increasing immigration restrictions, the volume of South–North migration has only increased over the past few decades. But does this mean that migration policies have failed and that states are generally unable to control migration? Not necessarily. First of all, we should not confuse statistical association with causality, which is particularly difficult to establish because we generally lack counterfactual cases. For instance, one might argue that the migration-reducing effects of immigration restrictions are counterbalanced by the migration-increasing effects of growing economic gaps between sending and receiving countries or economic growth in receiving countries, or the lifting of exit restrictions by origin countries (cf. de Haas and Vezzoli 2011). Hence, sustained or increasing migration does not necessarily prove policy ineffectiveness – as migration volumes might have been higher without migration controls. The other way around, a decrease in migration does not prove the policy successful – although politicians are generally eager to make such claims – as such a decrease might for instance also be the result of economic growth or an end of conflict in origin countries, or an economic recession in destination countries. So, finding better methodological approaches to establish (multiple) causality constitutes the first challenge facing research on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Valentin Danchev and Simona Vezzoli for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

Besides the huge difficulties involved in ‘proving’ causality as such, a second challenge is to bring more precision in research by assessing the *relative importance* of immigration policies compared to the effects of other migration determinants. After all, it can hardly be surprising that most policies discouraging or encouraging particular manifestations of migration will have ‘some’ effect. The real question is about the relative magnitude of this effect compared to macro-contextual migration determinants, which will eventually also determine the effectiveness and efficiency of policies. Although some studies assert a statistical relation between certain policy measures and particular migration flows, the relative importance of policy effects compared to the effects of other migration determinants remains largely unclear. It is one thing to find that restrictions on, say, low-skilled labour migration have a significant effect on decreasing inflows, but the real question is how large this effect is compared to the effect of other factors such as economic growth, employment, violent political conflict and personal freedoms. If the latter factors explain most variance in migration, one might for instance conclude that policies have a certain, but also limited effect on overall volumes and trends of migration. In other words, if most variance in migration is explained by structural migration determinants or other (e.g. labour market or macro-economic) policies, the margin of manoeuvre for migration policies is fundamentally limited.

In addition to finding better ways to measure the *existence* and *relative magnitude* of policy effects, a third, related, challenge is to improve insights into the very nature and evolution of migration policies. There seems to be reason to question the general assertion that migration policies have become more restrictive over the past decades. Although this idea is often taken for granted, the diverse and multiple nature of migration policies raises questions about our ability and utility to measure ‘overall’ levels of restrictiveness, and even about the overall assumption that policies have become more restrictive. While several countries have raised barriers for particular categories of migrants (for instance, low-skilled workers and asylum seekers), not all countries have done so, and immigration of other categories (for instance, family migrants and high-skilled workers) has often been facilitated. Changes in migration policy typically facilitate the entry of particular origin groups while simultaneously restricting the entry of other groups. For instance, ‘Fortress Europe’ may be an adequate metaphor to characterize policies towards asylum seekers and refugees (Hatton 2004), but seems inappropriate to characterize the immigration policies of EU or OECD countries as a whole (cf. Czaika and de Haas 2011a).

Another example is the US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ‘equalized’ immigration policies by ending positive discrimination of European immigrants and contributing to increasing non-European migration. This also reveals the strong Eurocentric bias underlying common views that migration to the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand was largely ‘free’ until at least the mid twentieth century (cf. Hatton and Williamson 1998) – it may have been relatively free for Europeans, but this was certainly not the case for Asians or Africans, for whom recent reforms have meant a liberalization. Also countries’ membership and accession to regional blocks such as the European Union typically coincides with liberalization of migration of citizens of member states, while immigration restrictions for ‘third-country’ nationals are sustained or further tightened. Because migration policies typically consist of a ‘mixed bag’ of various measures targeting particular groups of immigrants, there is a considerable risk of over-generalizing. While migration policies are likely to affect patterns of migration selectivity, the impact on the overall magnitude of

migration flows is more uncertain as these are strongly affected by other macro-structural factors, while migrants' agency and strategies tend to create meso-level structures (such as migrant networks) which facilitate migration over formally closed borders. Since state policies simultaneously constrain or enable immigration and emigration of particular (age, gender, skill, ethnic, regional) groups along particular geographical pathways, states perhaps play a more significant role in *structuring* emigration through influencing the (initial) composition and spatial patterns of migration, rather than in affecting overall volumes and long-term trends, which, particularly in liberal democracies, appear to be *primarily* affected by other, economic, social and cultural migration determinants.

These examples show that any serious inquiry into the effect of migration policies not only needs to define the concept, but also to 'unpack' or disaggregate 'migration policies' into the multitude of laws, measures and regulations states deploy in their attempts to regulate immigration and emigration along categories that are based on national origin and further characteristics such as gender, age, education, occupation and officially defined main migration motives (e.g. labour, refugee, family, student). As migration policies are typically affected and shaped by different, often opposed, interests, policies are typically internally incoherent, which further emphasizes the need to break down policies into the specific measures and regulations they comprise.

In addition, conventional views of increasing migration policy restrictiveness typically ignore emigration policies pursued by origin states, which are as diverse and multiple as immigration policies, but which seem to have become less restrictive overall. Only a declining number of strong, authoritarian states with closed economies are willing and capable of imposing blanket exit restrictions. Paradoxically, while an increasing number of, particularly developing, countries seem to *aspire* to regulate emigration, their *capability* to do so is fundamentally and increasingly limited by legal (human rights), economic and political constraints (de Haas and Vezzoli 2011). The ability of governments to affect overall immigration and emigration levels seems to decrease as the level of authoritarianism goes down. This also reveals the need to look beyond the role of migration policies *per se* and to explore the ways in which states affect the migration process more generally.

## 1 Research questions and approach

So, the crucial question remains: how do states and policies shape migration processes independently of and in their interaction with other migration determinants in receiving and sending countries? This question can be disaggregated into three fundamental, interrelated sub-questions:

1. What are the main determinants of international migration?
2. What has been the nature and evolution of migration policies?
3. How do states and policies affect migration flows independently of and in interaction with other migration determinants?

Due to serious methodological and theoretical flaws, scholarly research has so far hardly been able to produce convincing answers to these questions, and the second and third questions in particular. The inconclusive nature of this debate reveals an overall lack of conceptual, analytical and empirical rigour in the study of migration policy effects. Most existing evidence is descriptive, biased and partial, which is related to the weak embedding of migration policies research into general theories on the causes of migration.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that the limited of capacity of research to answer these key questions is not exclusively linked to limitations of data and statistical models (which usually receive the blame), but also to the rather weak theoretical foundations of ‘push-pull’ or gravity models which are routinely, but uncritically, used for studying migration determinants. For the very reason that they are often not grounded in migration theory, they tend to ignore or fail to properly specify several theoretically important migration determinants in receiving and, particularly, sending countries. Even with ideal data, statistical analyses will not lead to compelling evidence if theoretically relevant migration determinants are omitted in empirical models, or if models are based on the short term or only focus on one particular migration flow (e.g. asylum seekers). This makes it impossible to study possible knock-on effects or what I have dubbed ‘substitution effects’ (see below) of one particular measure through the diversion of migration flows to other geographical, legal or illegal channels.

In order to improve insights into the role of states and policies in migration processes, there is a need to embed the systematic analysis of policy effects into a comprehensive analytical framework of the sending- and receiving-country factors driving international migration. Although there is consensus that macro-contextual economic and political factors and meso-level factors such as networks all play ‘some’ role, there is no agreement on their relative weight and mutual interaction. How do migration policies precisely affect migration if we control for the many other factors that drive international migration? Or, to turn the question around: how do macro-level processes such as ‘development’, economic growth, demographic change, education, democratization and conflict in origin and destination countries affect migration independently from policy interventions? In other words, what are the constraints and relative margins within which migration policies can have an effect?

Why has research on this issue hardly advanced over the past decades? A first problem is the rather weak connection between studies on migration policies and migration determinants on the one hand and fundamental research and theories on the causes of migration on the other. A second problem is that fundamental theoretical research on the nature and causes of migration processes has made relatively little progress over the last few decades (cf. Arango 2000; Bakewell 2010; Massey et al. 1998). There is a plethora of research on the social, cultural and economic *impacts* of migration on sending and, particularly, receiving societies. In comparison, and with the possible exception of research on migration networks, there has been much less theoretically driven research on the nature and causes of migration processes themselves. This particularly applies to the study of the precise role of policies and states in migration processes. Other factors obstructing advances in research on migration determinants are data problems and unproductive divisions between, particularly economic and non-economic, social science disciplines (cf. Boswell 2008) as well as qualitative and quantitative approaches.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The lack of theoretical progress might also be due to the fact that the very term ‘cause’ in social sciences refers to explanations that are time-space independent; and often independent from people’s perception and interpretation. Hence, conventional understandings of causality might preclude migration studies from developing new theories. Research has shown that migration is a patterned process, not a random one, and is also (historically and structurally) contingent. For example, functionalism may try to see how migration realize some social functions. This also raises the question whether the available theories on ‘causes’ can be readily used or if we need new to elaborate new understandings of causality and behaviour that can accommodate agency and contingency. Therefore, strictly speaking, it may seem more appropriate to refer to ‘theories that

To start filling these research gaps, in this paper I aim to outline the contours of a theoretical and empirical research agenda for generating improved insights into the ways states and policies shape migration processes independently from and in their interaction with other migration determinants in receiving and sending countries. First, I will review existing, often disciplinary, theories on migration and I will argue how their fragmented insights can be integrated in one framework through conceptualizing virtually all manifestations of (internal and international) migration as a function of *capabilities* and *aspirations* to migrate. Second, I will argue that considerable conceptual confusion can be removed if we distinguish the preponderant role of *states* in migration processes from the hypothetically more marginal role of specific *immigration* and *emigration policies*. Subsequently, based on a brief theorization of the role of states and policies in migration I will hypothesize four different (spatial, categorical, inter-temporal, reverse flow) ‘substitution effects’ explaining migration policy failure, which can guide further research on migration determinants within and outside the context of the DEMIG project.

## 2 Theories on the causes of migration

### 2.1 Functionalist migration theories

The preceding analysis has indicated that a robust analysis of the role of states and policies in migration processes is conditional on its sound embedding within a more general theoretical framework on the determinants of migration processes. Although there is a quantitative, generally econometrically oriented literature on migration determinants including some studies on the effect of policies (for a review, see Czaika and de Haas 2011a), the literature is generally characterized by a conspicuous ignorance of insights from recent migration theories. Hence, migration determinants research is generally based on obsolete, theoretically void ‘push-pull’ and gravity models.

Implicitly or explicitly, gravity and push-pull models are rooted into functionalist social theory. Functionalist social theory tends to see society as a system – or an aggregate of interdependent parts, with a tendency towards equilibrium. This perspective, in which people are expected to move from low-income to high-income areas, has remained dominant in migration studies since Ravenstein (1885; 1889) formulated his laws of migration. The idea that migration is a function of spatial disequilibria constitutes the cornerstone assumption of so-called ‘push-pull’ models which still dominate much gravity-based migration modelling as well as common-sensical and non-specialist academic thinking about migration. Push-pull models usually identify various economic, environmental, and demographic factors which are assumed to push migrants out of places of origin and lure them into destination places. While deeply rooted in functionalist, equilibrium thinking, it is difficult to classify push-pull models a theory because they tend merely to specify a rather ambiguous list of factors that play ‘a’ role in migration. Push-pull models tend to be static and tend to portray migrants as ‘passive pawns’ lacking any agency (which can perhaps be defined as the ability of people to make independent choices – to act or not act in specific

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attempt to explain migration’ than to ‘theories on the causes of migration’, because there are different forms of explanations and only some of them refer to causes. Furthermore, ‘causes’ convey a rather universalistic, static and ‘sterile’ view which largely rules out agency and contingency. I am grateful to Valentin Danchev for drawing my attention to some of these issues.

ways – and, crucially, to *alter* structure) and fail to conceptualize migration as a *process* (de Haas 2010a).<sup>3</sup>

Neo-classical migration theory is the best known and most sophisticated application of the functionalist social scientific paradigm in migration studies. At the macro-level, neo-classical economic theory explains migration by geographical differences in the supply and demand for labour. At the micro-level, neo-classical migration theory views migrants as individual, rational and income-maximizing actors, who decide to move on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation. Assuming free choice and full access to information, they are expected to go where they can be the most productive, that is, where they are able to earn the highest wages. Todaro (1969) and Harris and Todaro (1970) elaborated the basic two-sector model of rural-to-urban migration, explaining migration on the basis of ‘expected income’ (adjusted for the likelihood of unemployment) differentials. The initial Harris-Todaro model for internal migration has, with some modifications, also been applied to international migration (Borjas 1989; Borjas 1990). Later modifications of the neo-classical model included the costs and risks of migration, and conceptualized migration as an investment in human capital in order to explain migration selectivity (Bauer and Zimmermann 1998; Sjaastad 1962).

Neo-classical and other equilibrium migration models largely explain migration by geographical differences in (expected) incomes and wage levels (Harris and Todaro 1970; Lee 1966; Todaro 1969). Although it would be hard to deny that economic differentials play a major role in driving migration processes, this almost sounds more like a truism or assumption than a theory. Furthermore, this basic insight alone is insufficient to explain the strongly patterned, non-random nature of real-life migration processes. For instance, these models have difficulties explaining return migration, migration in the absence of wage differentials and, particularly, adequately grasping the role of states, networks and other institutions in *structuring* migration. They also largely ignore non-economic migration drivers and typically fail to explain development-driven *increases* in migration.

## **2.2 Conflict theory: bringing in structure**

Other theories of migration reject the underlying functionalist assumption of conventional neo-classical models that migration decisions are based on the rational cost-benefit calculation of income-maximizing individuals operating in well-functioning markets. The new economics of labour migration (NELM) hypothesizes that migration, particularly under conditions of poverty and risk, is difficult to explain within a neo-classical framework. NELM conceptualizes migration as a collective household strategy to overcome market failures and spread income risks rather than a mere response of income-maximizing individuals to expected wage differentials (Stark 1991; Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor 1999). This gives considerable theoretical room to explain migration in the absence of significant wage differentials. NELM also argues that income inequality and relative deprivation *within* sending societies are major drivers of migration (Skeldon 2002; Stark and Taylor 1989). Through remittances, migration can also be a livelihood strategy used by families and

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<sup>3</sup> Agency can simultaneously reproduce and transform structure. In their seminal review of the concept, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provide a more precise definition of agency as ‘the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations’.

households to raise investment capital if credit markets fail. Within a broader social scientific perspective, it is possible to reinterpret NELM as a theory that explains migration as an active attempt – an act of agency – by social groups to overcome structural constraints. An important methodological inference of these ‘new’ theories is that market access, income inequality, relative deprivation, and social security are important migration determinants, and need to be included in empirical models if possible.

NELM-inspired migration theory seems particularly relevant for explaining migration in developing countries and other situations in which migrants face considerable constraint and risk, and therefore also seems applicable to ‘non-labour’ forms of migration, such as refugee migration (de Haas 2010a; Lindley 2007). This points to a more general weakness of conventional ways of classifying migration into distinct types (labour/economic, refugee, family; or voluntary vs. non-voluntary) and the concomitant tendency to develop separate theories for them. This is deeply problematic, as these migration types reflect legal rather than sociological categories. These categorizations ignore empirical evidence that migration is typically driven by a range of contextual factors and that individual motivations to migrate are often mixed. This makes strict distinctions such as between voluntary and forced migration, or between family and labour migration, often deeply problematic. This seems certainly to be the case in the context of restrictive immigration policies, in which prospective migrants perceived policies as opportunity structures within which the choice of migration channel is likely to be based on relative ease and costs rather than on a consideration of which category best matches their ‘genuine’ migration motives.

While some would still classify NELM as an amended form of neo-classical theory,<sup>4</sup> a more profound critique of neo-classical and push-pull migration theories would stress their a-historical nature and their failure to conceptualize how macro-structural factors such as states, policies, labour markets, status hierarchies, power inequalities and social group formation (including migrant networks) strongly constrain individual choice and explain why most migration tends to occur in socially selective and geographically strongly *patterned* ways; that is, along well-defined pathways or corridors between particular origins and destinations. Conventional economic models usually incorporate structural factors as additional costs and risks individuals face. It certainly does make sense to assume that structural constraints affect the cost-benefit calculus and destination choice. However, the reduction of such factors to individual costs and benefits makes such models inherently blind to the very *structural* features of such factors, which can only be analysed on the group (family, community, society) level as they are embedded in and reproduced by patterns of relations between people. Despite the considerable merits of neo-classical approaches, their methodological individualism largely inhibits them from capturing structural factors.

At a more fundamental level, functionalist social theory can be criticized for being unable to explain growing disequilibria, structural power inequalities, social contradictions and the role of conflict in social transformation; as well as for its inability to conceptualize structure and agency. In contrast, ‘conflict theory’, the social scientific opposite of functionalist/equilibrium theory, postulates that social and economic systems tend to

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<sup>4</sup> While different in several respects from neo-classical theory, NELM does not question its rationality and utility-maximizing assumptions. However, this partly semantic debate is not necessarily a very useful one, as the outcome also depends on how exactly to define ‘neo-classical’.

reproduce and *reinforce* structural inequalities and serve the interests of the powers that be, and that they can only be altered through a radical change in power structures through the organized (structured) resistance of oppressed groups (e.g. revolution, unions, strikes). In other words, social transformation does not often come smoothly, and often requires *collective* action enabled by rising consciousness about one's perceived oppression and one's ability to overcome such oppression by peaceful or violent resistance (on conflict theory, see Collins (1994)).

Within the general social-scientific paradigm of 'conflict theory', Marxist, dependency, and world systems theory tend to see migration as the direct outflow of the spread of global capitalism and the related marginalization and uprooting of rural populations around the world (de Haas 2010a) who have no choice other than to migrate to cities (within and across borders!<sup>5</sup>) to join the urban proletariat. Migration is therefore seen as a process that serves the interests of large corporations and specific economic interest groups (such as farmers) and states that are strongly lobbied by these interests. These approaches can be criticized for being overly deductive and deterministic, with their concomitant portrayal of individuals as passive victims of economic macro-forces. In other words, individual migrants are hardly attributed any agency and, as far as they act, they are supposed to make irrational choices. In order to explain why people behave (migrate) in ways that go against their own objective, material interests, Marxist theory uses the concept of false consciousness, which can be defined as the 'failure to recognize the instruments of one's oppression or exploitation as one's own creation, as when members of an oppressed class unwittingly adopt views of the oppressor class' (Wiener 2005). The assumption that all or most migrants behave irrationally seems equally unrealistic as the full rationality and income-maximizing assumptions of orthodox neo-classical models. For instance, it would be difficult to reason that the choices of refugees or unemployed graduates to emigrate are not rational to a considerable extent.

Although few would still agree with the more orthodox versions of neo-Marxist theory in the face of ample empirical evidence pointing to the fact that poor people also exert a considerable amount of agency, it would also be naïve to deny that migration processes are to a significant extent determined by contextual factors, and that while individual choice is certainly not absent, it is considerably constrained by structural factors –facilitating migration of specific social groups along specific geographical and legal pathways while simultaneously impeding it for many others groups and along many other pathways. This seems particularly important for poor people with limited access to resources and markets and living in politically repressive environments.

A powerful example of 'structure' – among several others – that appears to be particularly crucial as a migration determinant is the *segmentation of labour markets*. Dual labour market theory (Piore 1979) argued that international migration is mainly driven by pull (employment) factors, since the segmentation of labour markets creates a permanent demand for cheap immigrant labour at the bottom, 'secondary' end of the labour market to occupy jobs that 'primary' workers typically shun, *primarily because of social status and relative deprivation motives*. The latter exemplifies the deep socio-cultural roots of what

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<sup>5</sup> In this respect, there is no essential difference between internal and international migration, which can both be seen as part and parcel of the same process of rural transformation and urban growth. Although international migration is more often subject of state regulation, this is not necessarily the case, and several states have attempted to regulate internal migration. This is another example of how conventional migration categories often impede rather than facilitate our understanding of migration as a social process.

superficially appears to be ‘just’ an economic phenomenon. Although this is a partial theory, that ignores sending-side explanations altogether and implicitly (and problematically) assumes a quasi-unlimited supply of migrant workers, its core argument is very powerful to explain the remarkable persistence of low-skilled migration to wealthy countries over the past half century as well as the coexistence of domestic unemployment and immigration: the demand for low-skilled migrants is sector-specific and has become structurally embedded in labour market structures and socio-cultural hierarchies.

In this context, Stephen Castles (2002: 1152) has argued that ‘it is one of the great fictions of our age that the “new economy” does not need “3-D workers” any more’. He argued that industrialized countries continue to import unskilled labor, and that – in the absence of sufficient legal channels for low-skilled labour migration – this often takes the form of systematic use of irregular migrants or asylum seekers (see Section 6 on ‘substitution effects’), whose very lack of rights makes them easy to exploit. Although the industries and mines in which low-skilled migrants worked have declined since the early 1970s, Saskia Sassen (1988) has argued that new internal and international divisions of labour have arisen, particularly in ‘global cities’, where the luxury consumption needs of the high-skilled have created new labour market demand, particularly in the lower skilled services, such as cleaning, childcare, restaurant work, gardening, but also in garment manufacture, construction, garment manufacture and food processing (see also Castles 2002).

Further elaborating upon the work by Piore, Castles, Sassen and others, it is possible to theorize that, over development processes, labour markets have grown increasingly complex and multi-segmented (and not just ‘dual’) while the general level and degree of specialization in education has increased. As the geographical expanse of labour markets typically increases as education goes up, increasing levels and complexity of education and labour markets seems to drive people to migrate in order to match supply and demand. This seems to be one of the main reasons why relatively wealthy and developed societies are inherently more mobile and migratory than relatively poor societies.

Studying and comparing the structure of labour markets as well as concomitant differences in (group-level, domestic and international) income inequalities and relative deprivation (cf. Czaika 2011) can also help us to further understand the occurrence of significant migration between regions or countries with similar *average* income levels. However, these hypotheses have remained largely untested. The methodological inference of these theoretical insights is that, in order to advance our understanding of the *structural* drivers of migration processes, there is a need to develop empirical approaches to assess the interrelated roles of labour market structure, education and skill structure, social fractionalization (for the latter, see Czaika 2011) and relative deprivation in affecting the volume and, particularly, the social composition and the geographical patterning of migration flows.

This example of labour markets exemplifies that, in order to explain real-world migration patterns, there is a need to go beyond gravity or push-pull approaches by looking beyond the level of ‘national averages’ such as GDP per capita and exploring the internal structure of societies and economies. This can partly be achieved through quantitative approaches, particularly through developing new indicators that capture key structural features such as inequality (e.g. Gini index), relative deprivation (Czaika and de Haas 2011b; Stark and Taylor 1991), social security (e.g., governments’ welfare spending), and labour

market structure (for instance, sectoral composition and the relative share of the informal sector). It goes without saying that all these factors are deeply affected by (non-migration!) policies pursued by states.

### **2.3 Filling the sending-country gap**

The weakness of labour market-based migration theories is that they focus on receiving-country demand factors, and generally ignore how origin-country factors such as labour market structure, income levels and inequalities, social security, conflict, states and public policies, affect migration. At best, labour market-focused migration theories assume a quasi-unlimited supply of (particularly low-skilled) migrant labour, which seems to be implicitly based on the naïve notion that high population growth, poverty and warfare in developing countries ‘push’ migrants to leave, thereby virtually reducing their agency to zero. This notion clearly conflicts with empirical and theoretical insights on the intrinsic relationship between migration and broader processes of development and social transformation (de Haas 2009; Hatton and Williamson 1998; Massey 1991; Skeldon 1997; Zelinsky 1971). The latter insights question the ‘unlimited supply hypothesis’ and reveal a much more complex picture of how development processes affect migration and crucially undermine the assumptions underpinning conventional migration theories.

For instance, conventional ideas that development in origin countries will reduce international migration are ultimately based on the assumption of ‘push-pull’ and ‘gravity’ models that there is an inversely proportional relationship between absolute levels and relative differences of wealth on the one hand and migration on the other. By contrast, another group of theories postulate that development leads to generally *increased* levels of immigration and emigration. ‘Migration transition theory’ (de Haas 2010a) hypothesizes that *constraints-loosening* and *aspirations-increasing* economic and human development and parallel demographic transitions tend to have an inverted J-curve or U-curve effect on emigration rates. This hypothesized non-linearity and the complexity of development-migration linkages contrast with conventional theories and also compel us to design different, theoretically informed empirical approaches away from standard ‘push-pull’ and gravity models.

More in general, the receiving-country bias of migration research points to the importance of advancing our theoretical understanding of the origin-country determinants of migration processes at different levels of aggregation. For instance, debates on migration policies are almost automatically focused on *immigration* control, revealing a general receiving-country bias in migration research, which completely ignores the important role of emigration policies pursued by sending states (de Haas and Vezzoli 2011). Social security and welfare spending is another example of a potentially crucial origin-country migration determinant. While there are several studies on the contested and questionable existence of a ‘welfare magnet’ effect on migration, this discussion is conspicuously biased towards destination states or countries, while there is reason to believe that factors such as social security matter equally if not more from an origin-society perspective (Kureková 2011). For instance, a recent study on labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) during the post-communist transition and after EU accession found that countries with less generous welfare states had significantly higher shares of their workers leaving to work abroad, also after controlling for the effect of wage differentials (Kureková 2011). More

generally, this example also shows the need to fully take into account the role of structural and institutional factors in origin societies in shaping migration processes.

#### **2.4 Bridging non-economic and economic migration determinants**

Conventional migration theories focus on how income and wage levels and, to a lesser extent, income inequalities affect migration processes. Although they might differ in their specification, they share a focus on economic differentials as the main driver of migration. This coincides with a research focus on labour migration and near-total separation from research on 'forced' or refugee migration. The implicit suggestion is that these different migration categories represent fundamentally different processes. There are many reasons to contest this view. After all, labels such as 'labour', 'refugee', 'family' or 'student' migration primarily reflect legal categories, which are useful for administrative procedures, but are not very meaningful categories to help understand migration *as a social process*. For instance, the 'voluntary'/'forced' migration dichotomy is simplistic because it assumes that one category of migrants enjoys total freedom and the other category has no choice or agency *at all*.

The legal-bureaucratic categories frequently used in social scientific research conceal the fact that, on a macro-level, migration processes are driven by a multitude of economic and non-economic factors and that, on a micro-level, migrants are motivated by a combination of multiple, interconnected but analytically distinct social, cultural, economic and political factors. For instance, economic development is positively associated with democratization processes (cf. Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994), and economic development and democratization are likely to affect migration processes simultaneously. It would be naïve to assume that refugees are *also* affected by economic and social considerations, certainly where destination choice is concerned. Likewise, 'labour migrants' are likely also to weigh personal freedoms in their migration decision-making. And 'family migrants' are potential workers too.

However, the ways in which non-economic factors such as political and personal freedoms affect migration is much more complex than it seems at first sight. From transition theory, we already know that the relation between development, economic growth and migration is fundamentally *non-linear*. Also democratization processes and related increases in personal freedoms seem to have rather ambiguous, and potentially non-linear effects on migration. For instance, while a lack of freedoms is likely to fuel migration *aspirations*, the same lack of freedoms may simultaneously decrease people's *capabilities* to migrate (de Haas 2010a). After all, authoritarian, non-democratic states also tend to curtail the freedoms of people to migrate, either through blocking exit or by creating bureaucratic obstacles such as excessive costs to acquire passports (de Haas and Vezzoli 2011; McKenzie 2005). This *might* explain the negative association between a lack of political freedoms and emigration (de Haas 2010a).

The same study suggested that there might be an unexpected positive relation between the lack of freedoms and levels of immigration (de Haas 2010a). It is as yet unclear whether this provides evidence for any variant of 'numbers vs. rights hypotheses' (Ruhs and Martin 2008), according to which there would be a trade-off between the rights that states attribute to migrants and the number of migrants who are allowed in. One possible explanation is that authoritarian states which give fewer rights to their citizens and even fewer to migrants also have a higher ability to impose segmented, inherently discriminatory

labour markets, to organize and recruit labour, to segregate immigrants from native populations, and are less sensitive to domestic political pressure for immigration reduction. More generally, this shows the need to radically improve our understanding of the role of states and migration policies in shaping migration processes.

These few examples also show the need to look beyond specific policies, and to consider the *nature* of states. For instance, the position of states both on the authoritarianism-democracy and on the strong-weak central power continuums seems to be an important macro-structural determinant of migration processes, as both positions affect aspirations and capabilities to migrate and the extent to which states will desire and be able to 'steer' migration. There is also a clear need to differentiate between different types of freedoms (e.g. freedom of expression, movement, and physical integrity, freedom from cruel and inhuman punishment, freedom from violence) as they are likely to affect migration in different ways.

### **3 Towards theoretical synthesis: an aspirations-capabilities framework**

The main challenge for advancing migration theory is how to synthesize the different migration theories developed across a range of social science disciplines – ranging from economics to anthropology. Faced with the daunting complexity and diversity of migration processes, migration scholars have often – and perhaps wearily – argued that an all-encompassing and all-explaining theory of migration will never arise (Castles and Miller 2009; Salt 1987; Van Amersfoort 1998). Unfortunately, this probably sensible observation has coincided with a strong tendency to abandon theorizing migration altogether. Although migration is certainly a complex and apparently 'messy' process, this goes for virtually all social processes. Moreover, migration may be complex, but it is certainly not a random process. Instead, it is a strongly socially structured and spatially patterned process, in which strong regularities can be discerned.

More generally, 'all-comprehensiveness' is not what social theory should be about in the first place. Social theory formation is precisely about striking a delicate balance between the desire to acknowledge the intricate complexities and the richness of social life on the one hand and the scientific need to discern underlying regularities, patterns and trends on the other. Theory formation is exactly about *generalizing*, which is a reductionist process by definition, where the exception may well prove the rule. Although it is indeed naïve to assume that a one-size-fits-all theory explaining migration at all places and at all times will ever arise, there is undoubtedly more room for theorizing on migration processes and how they reciprocally connect to broader processes of social and economic change.

Much can already be gained from developing a more unified social-scientific perspective on migration, in which unproductive disciplinary boundaries are broken down. In their seminal review of migration theories, Massey et al. (1993) rightly argued that the different theories on migration are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Because different disciplines use different jargons and methodological tools, they often seem irreconcilable, but below the surface they often study similar processes and causal links. Once conceptual confusion is resolved by debate, and sufficient openness is created to learn from other methodological approaches, a lot of the apparent contradictions turn out to be rather spurious, and cross-fertilization can enrich theoretical thinking. For instance, the new

economics of labour migration (NELM), which is one of the major past advances in economic migration theory, was apparently inspired by research on household composition and livelihood strategies conducted by anthropologists and sociologists (Lucas and Stark 1985: 901). Although there are marked differences between different theories, disciplines and associated research traditions, they are not necessarily incompatible, and there is considerable room to identify more common grounds and to create conceptual bridges.

However, an eclectic 'combining of insights' cannot solve some more fundamental problems, particularly when theories have different paradigmatic roots. For instance, it seems impossible to merge neo-classical and neo-Marxist migration theories, because they differ in their most fundamental assumptions. For similar reasons, theoretical problems cannot be solved by simply 'plugging in' variables 'representing' the different theories in the same regression equation, as is often the tendency. What is really lacking, and what is hindering theoretical synthesis, is a more comprehensive and convincing 'behavioural' framework of migration than the current theories offer. The only systematically elaborated micro-behavioural model of migration is neo-classical. Although neo-classical migration theory has been much reviled for a number of more and less convincing reasons, no credible alternative has been proposed so far.

Despite the enormous value of macro-level theories developed by sociologists, geographers and demographers, because of their very macro-level nature they often lack a 'behavioural link'<sup>6</sup> to the micro-level. In other words, they do not make explicit the behavioural assumptions underpinning the macro-level correlations they assume or describe. It would be to commit a classical 'ecological fallacy' to confound macro-level migration determinants (e.g. population growth, environmental degradation, climate change or variability) with individual migration motives – which is exactly what the push-pull and non-expert literature on environmental change and migration typically does. After all, people do not migrate 'because of' abstract concepts such as demographic transitions, declining fertility, ageing, population density, environmental degradation or factor productivity. For instance, there may often be a correlation between demographic and migration transitions, but this does not make clear why people should necessarily migrate under conditions of high population growth. People will only migrate if they *perceive* better opportunities elsewhere and have the *capabilities* to move. Although this assertion implies choice and agency, it also shows that this agency is constrained by (historically determined) conditions which create concrete opportunity structures.

Ultimately, in the social world, 'causality' therefore runs through people's agency, producing outcomes on the aggregate level which can perhaps be measured through macro-indicators. But any convincing macro-model should be underpinned by a credible micro-behavioural link. The lack of micro-behavioural foundation makes most macro-theories deterministic. In fact, the problem with the very term 'determinants' is that it conveys a somehow deterministic picture of 'causation from outside', independent from migrants' agency and internal migration dynamics. It seems therefore desirable to (re)define the

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to mention that in many social scientific approaches, behaviour has been conceived as a response to the environmental or contextual stimuli without taking into account cognitive processes, social hierarchies and agency. This actually comes close to push-pull and neo-classical models, whose notions of agency are rather mechanistic, if they exist at all. So, there is a need to define the concept of 'behaviour' more broadly so as to include agency.

concept of ‘determinants’ so as to include human agency, which has independent power to change social structures.

Crucially, most macro-theories ignore agency. At the same time, neo-classical migration theory has a reductionist, mechanistic concept of agency. Hence, what we need is a new and more realistic micro-level model or framework of migration. Such a framework should take into account empirical insights of decades of migration research from across a range of disciplines, but at the same time it should remain basic and parsimonious enough so as to fulfil its generalizing ambitions. Such a framework should specify the basic assumptions about the factors that make people decide to migrate (or not). Two further conditions need to be met: first, such a model should incorporate a sense of agency, and should not conceive migration as an almost ‘mechanistic’ response to a range of ‘pushes’ or ‘pulls’, or wage differentials. Ultimately, this is also the reason why gravity models normally used for trade cannot be assumed to be valid to model *human* migration. People are not goods. Goods are passive. People are humans, who make active decisions based on their subjective aspirations and preferences, so their behaviour is not just a function of macro-level disequilibria, neither does their behaviour necessarily decrease these disequilibria. Second, such a micro-model should incorporate a sense of structure, in the sense that migration behaviour is constrained by structurally determined resource and information limitations.

This above analysis leads to the proposition that, in order to improve our insights into the factors driving migration, and to synthesize prior theories, an improved theoretical model of migration should:

- conceive migration *aspirations* as a function of spatial *opportunity* (instead of only income or wage) *differentials* and people’s *life aspirations*
- conceive migration *propensities* as a function of their *aspirations* and *capabilities* to migrate.

These two basic assumptions about migration behaviour can serve as basic building blocks to build a theory of migration which synthesizes many existing theoretical and empirical insights. Although this still needs considerable theoretical elaboration in future work, such a conceptualization would allow us to:

- integrate economic and non-economic theories on migration and overcome ‘migration category’-based theorizing (particularly through the notion of *opportunity* instead of income differentials)
- integrate theories on so-called ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migration (particularly through the constraints dimension embedded in the capabilities concept)
- link micro- to macro-theories (as macro-level factors shape opportunity structures which condition – that is, simultaneously enable and constrain – people’s migration decisions as far as their own capabilities allow)
- open new avenues for integrating agency and culture into migration theory (such as through the concept of aspirations).

The conceptualization of migration as a function of opportunity rather than income or wage differentials compels us to study how social, economic and political conditions affect migration processes *simultaneously*. Improved empirical models should reflect this and would allow for the study of the relative importance of each of such factors as well as their mutual interaction. In an attempt to move beyond the artificial separation between

economic and non-economic explanations, it seems useful to apply Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities approach to migration theory. In his book *Development as Freedom*, Sen (1999) defined development as the process of expanding the substantive freedoms that people enjoy. In order to operationalize these 'freedoms', he used the concept of human *capability*, which refers to the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value, and to enhance the substantive choices they have (Sen 1997: 1959). Sen stressed that *freedom* is central to the process of development primarily for its *intrinsic*, wellbeing-enhancing power, which has to be clearly distinguished from the *instrumental* effectiveness of freedoms of in contributing to economic progress, which have been the usual benchmark to 'measure' development.

Within this capabilities perspective, I conceive human mobility as an integral part of human development for both *intrinsic* and *instrumental* reasons. First, people can only move if they have the capabilities to do so. Human mobility can be defined as the capability to decide where to live – and migration is the associated functioning. Expansions in this capability (through accessing social, human and/or economic resources) are an expansion of the choices open to an individual and therefore of their freedom. This is the *intrinsic* argument why mobility can be an integral part of human development. At the same time, movement can enable people to improve other dimensions relevant to their capabilities such as their income, their health, the education of themselves and of their children, and their self-respect. This is the *instrumental* value of mobility for development. This is why it is important to distinguish between the *capability* to move and the act of movement. In fact, some manifestations of migration (e.g. refugee migration) are a result of the choices and freedoms of individuals becoming more restricted. So, enhanced mobility is not only the freedom to move – it is also the freedom to stay in one's preferred location. Having choice to stay or to go, and where to go, captures the very essence of agency.

The application of a capabilities-focused conceptualization of development (Sen 1999) also creates conceptual room to fully include factors such as education, health, social security, various (income, gender, ethnic) inequalities, and personal and political freedoms as migration determinants. It also creates room to broaden our view of freedom- and wellbeing-generating resources to include not only economic, but also human and social resources or 'capitals'.

Another conceptual advantage of Sen's perspective is that the notion of capabilities creates analytical room to start incorporating notions of agency in migration theory. The concept of agency is intrinsically linked to the power of social actors to affect processes of structural change. It is important to emphasize that agency can both sustain as well as alter processes and structural conditions (cf. Emirbayer and Mische 1998). From this, migration itself can be conceptualized as a form, or expression of, agency (see also de Haas 2009), and not only a 'functionalist' response to spatial differentials in economic opportunity. However, the extent to which social actors can exert agency (that is, their capability) is dependent on structural conditions which determine the space of manoeuvre within which individuals can make independent choices. Within the capabilities framework, the act of migration itself can be wellbeing-enhancing for the intrinsic value of the migration experience. Crucially, this enables us to incorporate manifestations of migration and mobility (e.g. 'migration as adventure', 'gap years', 'lifestyle migration', au pair migration), where the experience *itself* is an important motive for moving, and the improvement of material circumstances plays a relatively minor (or no) role. As with tourism, through discovering new horizons and

acquainting oneself with other cultures, in particular for young people, migration can have an *intrinsic* wellbeing-enhancing dimension.

As a next conceptual step, and drawing on Isaiah Berlin's (1969) concepts of negative and positive liberty, we can conceptualize capabilities as a function of *positive* and *negative* freedoms. Within Berlin's perspective, *negative liberty* means the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. This comes close to classical ways of conceiving freedom, which are particularly focused on the role of states and politics (including war and violent oppression) in imposing constraints on people's freedom or even being an outright threat to people's lives. This concept of liberty is also the basis for the United Nations Refugee Protection regime,<sup>7</sup> and international human rights organizations. Within this perspective, democracy, conflict prevention and promoting the rule of law are typically seen as ways to promote people's freedoms and to prevent 'forced' migration.

Berlin's (1969) concept of *positive liberty* refers to the possibility or the fact of acting in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes. This concept pertains to the agency of individuals and groups to change their life circumstances and to escape from disadvantaged positions. It is enshrined in international human rights<sup>8</sup> and notions of 'empowerment' in development theory. Positive liberty embodies the notion that the absence of external constraint (negative liberty) is not a sufficient condition for people to improve their wellbeing. This is a point that Amartya Sen has particularly stressed in his development theory. For instance, a given state might be formally democratic and there might be an absence of political persecutions, but illiterate and poor people generally lack the capabilities and resources to actually make use of such liberties. In other words, people need access to resources in the forms of social, human and material (including financial) capital in order to exert their agency, such as the freedom to migrate or not to migrate. This reveals a fundamental paradox: although relative deprivation of freedoms and an awareness of better opportunities *elsewhere* may make people *aspire* to migrate, absolute deprivation of either negative or positive freedoms, or both, will prevent them from exerting such migratory agency.

So, from a capabilities point of view, the very term 'forced migration' is somehow an oxymoron, as people still need capabilities to be able to migrate. While deprivation of negative freedoms is likely to motivate people to migrate, they need a certain level of empowerment or access to positive freedoms (social, human and/or material capital) in order to actually be *capable* of fleeing towards a particular destination. When people are deprived of both freedoms, they are generally forced to stay where they are. In conflict

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<sup>7</sup> Under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees from 1951, a refugee is a person who (according to the formal definition in article 1A of this Convention), owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country.

<sup>8</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings – regardless of cultural, organizational, religious or ethnic associations – should be entitled to certain social, political and legal rights of toleration. Although this definition, and the term 'toleration' in particular, still largely resonates 'negative freedoms', the way this is enshrined into international law goes beyond this, and includes 'positive freedoms' such as people's right to a 'standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control' (article 25.1) as well as the right to education and employment.

situations, the most deprived are typically the ones who are 'forced to stay'. The concept of negative freedom is also useful for theorizing the role of immigration and emigration policies. Restrictive immigration policies can decrease people's 'negative freedoms' to migrate, and can create situations of 'involuntary immobility', a term aptly coined by Carling (2002). Such involuntary immobility can also occur under restrictive emigration policies. For instance, repressive countries often experience lower emigration, because authoritarian states have a larger capability to deprive their citizens of the right to exit (de Haas and Vezzoli 2011).

However, even under liberal migration policies where people may enjoy abundant negative freedoms, if they are deprived of the basic positive freedoms and access to social, human and economic resources, they will still be unable to migrate, particularly over larger distances. All of this helps to explain the paradox of why development often coincides with increasing levels of migration. From this, I hypothesize that most emigration is likely to occur when people enjoy a maximum of negative freedoms and a moderate level of positive freedoms, as very high levels of positive freedoms and declining spatial opportunity differentials would somehow decrease their aspirations to migrate. This also shows why so-called push-pull theories are fundamentally flawed: with the exception of extreme situations like slavery, people are not goods that can be passively moved: they need to move by themselves, and a fundamental precondition for that to happen is that they have the willingness and capabilities (i.e. economic, social and human resources) to do so.

This brings in the concept of aspirations, which is a crucial element of this attempt at theoretical synthesis and, particularly, the attempt to better incorporate agency in migration theory. Conventional migration theories either totally disregard (such as Marxist or push-pull models) or have very reductionist notions of agency. Although within neo-classical and other functionalist migration theories, there is room for individual decision-making, there is no genuine room for agency, because individual behaviour is a totally predictable, mechanistic outcome of wage and other opportunity differentials. The underlying assumptions are that people are free from constraints, enjoy full access to information, and make migration decisions with the aim of maximizing their utility. These are clearly unrealistic assumptions. Although mainstream economics and, to a certain extent, migration economics have come a long way to acknowledge information and market imperfections in their theories and models, the utility-maximizing notion underlying decision-making has not been fundamentally challenged.

Here, it is important to observe that push-pull and gravity models as well as neo-classical and other functionalist migration theories implicitly assume that people's preferences and, hence, aspirations are constant across societies and over time, and basically boil down to individual income (or 'utility') maximization. In other words, people living in different societies, despite the huge variations in the amount and type of information and social, cultural and economic resources they can access, are somehow assumed to react in similar fashions to similar external stimuli or exogenously defined 'push' and 'pull' factors. This is what makes functionalist theory inherently mechanistic and their micro-models totally devoid of any real sense of agency, as individual choices are entirely predictable and human beings are, indeed, conceptualized to be 'pulled' and 'pushed' in space like atoms without their own will and ability to make independent choices and, herewith, affect structural change. Functionalist theory conceptualizes migration as an equilibrium- and system-reinforcing process. It therefore leaves no analytical room for

either structural inequalities embedded in social hierarchies or migrants exercising agency. Such agency can either reproduce the existing structural inequalities and social relations (the normal pattern), or it can contribute to social transformation, which can be defined as a fundamental shift in the way society is organized (Castles 2010) that goes beyond the incremental and smooth change embodied in functionalist theory.

The crucial problem is that functionalist migration theory assumes that overall (migration) preferences are more or less constant across societies and over time. This ignores the fact that culture, education and access and exposure to particular forms of information are likely to have a huge impact on (1) people's notions of the good life and, hence, personal life aspirations; and (2) their awareness and perception of opportunities elsewhere. If people do not aspire to other lifestyles 'elsewhere', even if they seem 'objectively' or 'materially' better, they will not translate this awareness into a desire to migrate. In fact, cultural 'home preference' seems to be a major explanation for why most people do not migrate. On the other hand, if migration-as-an-experience is intrinsically seen as wellbeing-enhancing, people might even voluntarily opt for 'objectively' less favourable circumstances. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that, in general, people's personal life aspirations and awareness of opportunities elsewhere increase when levels of education and access to information improve in processes that are usually conceived as 'human development'. If this coincides with the occurrence of significant differences in structurally determined spatial opportunity differentials, this is more likely to generate aspirations to migrate in an attempt to fulfil these life aspirations.

In another paper, I have therefore stressed the importance of considering the role of factors such as access to education and information in migration processes, not only because 'human capital' endows people with greater resources and incentives to migrate (which is the focus of economic migration theories), but also because these factors have arguably an *aspirations-increasing* effect and can paradoxically lead to *increasing* aggregate emigration propensities also under conditions of high economic growth and human development (de Haas 2010a).<sup>9</sup> This shows the benefit of conceptualizing migration as a function of *aspirations* and *capabilities* within a given set of opportunity structures.

Altogether, this yields a more comprehensive picture of behavioural causes of migration beyond the basic model of income-maximizing individuals reacting to wage differentials. Such an amended theoretical framework also helps us to re-conceptualize migration as an *intrinsic* part of processes of human development rather than the (causal) 'outcome' of development failure<sup>10</sup> or a function of income and wage differentials or other externally given 'push' and 'pull' factors. Conceiving migration as a function of capabilities and aspirations to migrate also gives us better, albeit certainly not perfect, conceptual tools to start incorporating meaningful notions of agency in theoretical models and empirical approaches. More in general, the simultaneous incorporation of agency and structure in migration theories remains one of the main challenges for advancing migration theory and, hence, the specification of more realistic empirical approaches. As I already mentioned above, even purely at the discursive level, one of the most fundamental problems is that the very term 'determinants' linguistically 'externalizes' the factors affecting migration, moving

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<sup>9</sup> This is additional to the structural mobility-fuelling role of increasing labour market complexity.

<sup>10</sup> This idea is particularly prevalent in popular ideas that a 'misery push' is driving much South–North migration.

it implicitly outside the realm of agency and implying a physical, mechanistic notion of causality in which migrants are assumed to (passively and entirely predictably) react to those factors.

A key condition for incorporating structure and agency is to connect both concepts and to understand their dialectics. In this respect, 'structure' is often erroneously seen as a set of constraints, whereas in reality structures simultaneously constrain and facilitate agency. As we have seen, factors such as states and policies, economic and social inequalities as well as networks have a strong *structuring* effect on migration, which means that they are inclusive for some (age, gender, skill, ethnic, regional) groups and exclusive for others, and that they strongly favour migration along certain geographical pathways while discouraging it along others. This typically leads to a rather neat social and geographical structuring and clustering of migration.

So, the ensemble of structural conditions creates complex *opportunity structures*, endowing different individuals and social groups with different sets of negative and positive freedoms, which, depending on how these constellations affect their capabilities and aspirations, may or may not make them decide to migrate. In its turn, such agency will reciprocally affect these initial conditions through feedback effects, exemplifying the dialectics of structure and agency in migration processes.

#### 4 Linking micro and macro levels

The challenge to link agency and structure is also related to the difficulties of linking micro-level explanations of migration, which focus on how individual characteristics, access to resources, perceptions and preferences shape migration behaviour, to macro-level level theories which, ultimately, see migrants' behaviour as a rather passive, and therefore rather predictable, outcome of given opportunity structures. In the literature it has been argued that meso-level theories on the formation of networks and migration systems provide this vital link (Faist 1997). The migration literature has identified various feedback mechanisms which explain why, once started, migration processes tend to become partly self-perpetuating, leading to the formation of migrant networks and migration systems (Castles and Miller 2009; de Haas 2010b; Mabogunje 1970; Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1998). Such feedback loops provide a powerful, concrete example of the dialectics between agency and structure, as they show how migrants create meso-level structures such as networks and the 'migration industry' (Castles 2004a)<sup>11</sup> that have a knock-on (feedback) effect in reinforcing migration between particular places and countries through counter-flows of ideas and information (Mabogunje 1970), as well as decreasing the costs and risks of migration (Massey et al. 1998), thereby actively defying structural constraints such as high travel costs and restrictive immigration policies. This is a prime example of how migrants exert agency and are able to change initial structural conditions in such a way that they further facilitate migration along particular pathways. It is also a prime explanation of why states often find it difficult to control once-started migration processes. These notions are crucial for theorizing the role of states and policies in migration processes.

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<sup>11</sup> According to Castles (2004a) the 'migration industry' consists of clusters and networks of travel agents, lawyers, bankers, labour recruiters, brokers, interpreters, housing agents as well as human smugglers and traffickers, which have an interest in the continuation of migration. Besides networks, these are other examples of meso-level structures created by the migration process itself.

However, existing theories on these ‘internal dynamics’ of migration processes are characterized by some fundamental weaknesses which I reviewed in another paper (de Haas 2010b). First, the usual focus on migrant networks coincides with a neglect of other feedback dynamics that operate through the impact of migration on the sending and receiving contexts. Migration inevitably changes the initial structural conditions under which migration takes place in sending and receiving communities and societies, which, in their turn, reciprocally affect people’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate. Examples of such structural impacts include the impact of migration on income inequality and relative deprivation in origin societies, the migration-facilitating role of remittances, and the rise of immigrant-dominated entrepreneurial sectors in destination countries, as well as the segmentation of labour markets along ethnic lines. Such processes contribute to the formation of migration systems – a set of places or countries linked by flows and counter-flows of people, goods, services, and information, which *tend* to facilitate further exchange, including migration, between the places (de Haas 2010b; Fawcett 1989; Kritz et al. 1992; Mabogunje 1970; Massey et al. 1998).

Second, the largely circular logic of these theories reveals an inability to conceptualize which migration-undermining feedback mechanisms may counteract migration-facilitating feedback dynamics and which may explain the endogenous decline of established migration systems. Theoretically, this can be explained by applying insights from the critical social capital literature pioneered by Portes (1998) and, in particular, the notion of negative social capital, to migration theories (de Haas 2010b). Migrants do not necessarily help each other, and strong social ties and networks can also exclude non-group members. One of the methodological lessons is that empirical models should not just assume that the strength of network effects is a function of the size of migrant communities, as recent quantitative work tends to do. The relative importance of networks in facilitating migration crucially depends on the relative dependence on social (as compared to economic and human) capital among migrant communities. Moreover, positive network effects tend to decline over time.

## **5 Theorizing the role of states and policies in migration processes**

If anything, the above analysis points to the preponderance of structural factors such as economic and human development, labour market structure, social stratification, income inequalities, relative deprivation and social security, and the role of negative freedoms as well as positive freedoms in the form of access to material, social and human capital in shaping people’s capabilities and aspirations to migrate. This compels us to ask the following crucial question: within this broader whole of big forces and structural factors, and migrants’ considerable agency to shape and consolidate migration pathways and networks, what role is still left for migration policies pursued by states? Is that a comparatively marginal one, or do policies still play a key role?

There is no simple answer to that question, first of all because the role of states and policies seems to vary according to the nature of the states, and is also dependent on the phase of migration system formation. The answer also crucially depends on whether we refer to the role of states in general or the role of specific migration policies. However, based on this theoretical framework it is possible to elaborate a few hypotheses. These are based on the notion that migration policies primarily affect negative freedoms in the form of the right to leave or enter a national territory, but that, primarily through non-migration

policies (such as economic and education), states also affect people's positive freedoms. While these factors affect people's capabilities to migrate, factors such as repression and poverty affect people's aspirations to migrate.

First, the power of states to influence immigration and, particularly, emigration is much higher for repressive, authoritarian and centralized states than for liberal, democratic and decentralized states, which need to take more account of democratic processes and fundamental human rights. Second, we can hypothesize that states and policies often play an important role in the *initiation* of international migration, whether in the form of recruitment (for instance, of 'guest workers'), visa requirements, colonialism, military occupation, or political repression (Castles and Miller 2009; de Haas 2008; Entzinger 1985; Massey et al. 1998; Penninx 1982; Skeldon 1997). On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that this is not always the case and that certain policies, such as recruitment, can also be an attempt to formalize already existing flows.

However, once a certain number of migrants have settled at the destination, migration can become partly self-perpetuating (Castles 2004b; Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1998). The 'internal dynamics' of migration processes make additional movements more likely through various social, cultural and economic feedback mechanisms (de Haas 2010b). According to migration systems theory (Mabogunje 1970), such mechanisms lead to almost organized migratory flows between particular regions and countries (Kritz et al. 1992; Portes and Böröcz 1987). In particular, migrant networks are believed to play a crucial role in facilitating continued migration over formally closed borders (Böcker 1994), which is a key example of how migrants' agency and counter-strategies can actively undermine states' attempts to control migration.

Many migration scholars are therefore sceptical about the abilities of liberal democratic states to control migration. They argue that fluctuations in migration primarily respond to structural demand factors determined by human development, economic cycles, employment and changes in the structure of (segmented) labour markets; factors which largely lie beyond the reach of policy-makers (Castles and Miller 2009; Thielemann 2006). At the same time, migrant networks further facilitate migration along established pathways. Hence the assertion that 'borders are largely beyond control and little can be done to really cut down on immigration' (Bhagwati 2003:99; cf. Düvell 2005). Other scholars have countered such scepticism by arguing that, on the whole, immigration policies have been largely effective (Brochmann and Hammar 1999; Carling 2002; Collyer 2006; Strikwerda 1999).

However, this is partly a spurious disagreement. Considerable conceptual confusion can be reduced by clearly distinguishing the preponderant role of *states* in migration processes from the comparatively more marginal role of specific *immigration and emigration policies*. There can be no doubt that *states* can play an absolutely crucial role in shaping and transforming migration patterns (Brochmann and Hammar 1999; Castles and Miller 2009; Skeldon 1997; Strikwerda 1999). Over the course of modern history, trends and patterns of migration have been intrinsically linked to processes of state formation and decline, economic and territorial imperialism and warfare. The very notion of *international migration* presumes the existence of national states and clearly defined territorial and institutional borders. The importance of factors such as economic and human development, labour markets, education and income inequalities points to the importance of *non-migration policies*, such as labour market, taxation, social welfare and foreign policies in

*indirectly* affecting migration processes. From this, it is possible to hypothesize that state influence is primarily felt through general policies rather than migration policies *per se*, as the latter have a limited influence on the main determinants of migration.

In the face of the dispute in migration research about the effectiveness of migration policy, it is important to minimize conceptual confusion by clearly defining what constitutes migration policy and by distinguishing policy *effectiveness* from policy *effects* (Czaika and de Haas 2011a). Migration policies can be defined as laws, rules, measures, and practices implemented by national states with the stated objective to influence the volume, origin and internal composition of migration flows. The term ‘effectiveness’ refers to the extent to which policy objectives have been met, while the ‘effect’ just refers to the actual impact of a particular law, measure or regulation. This gives effectiveness a strong evaluative (and subjective) dimension.

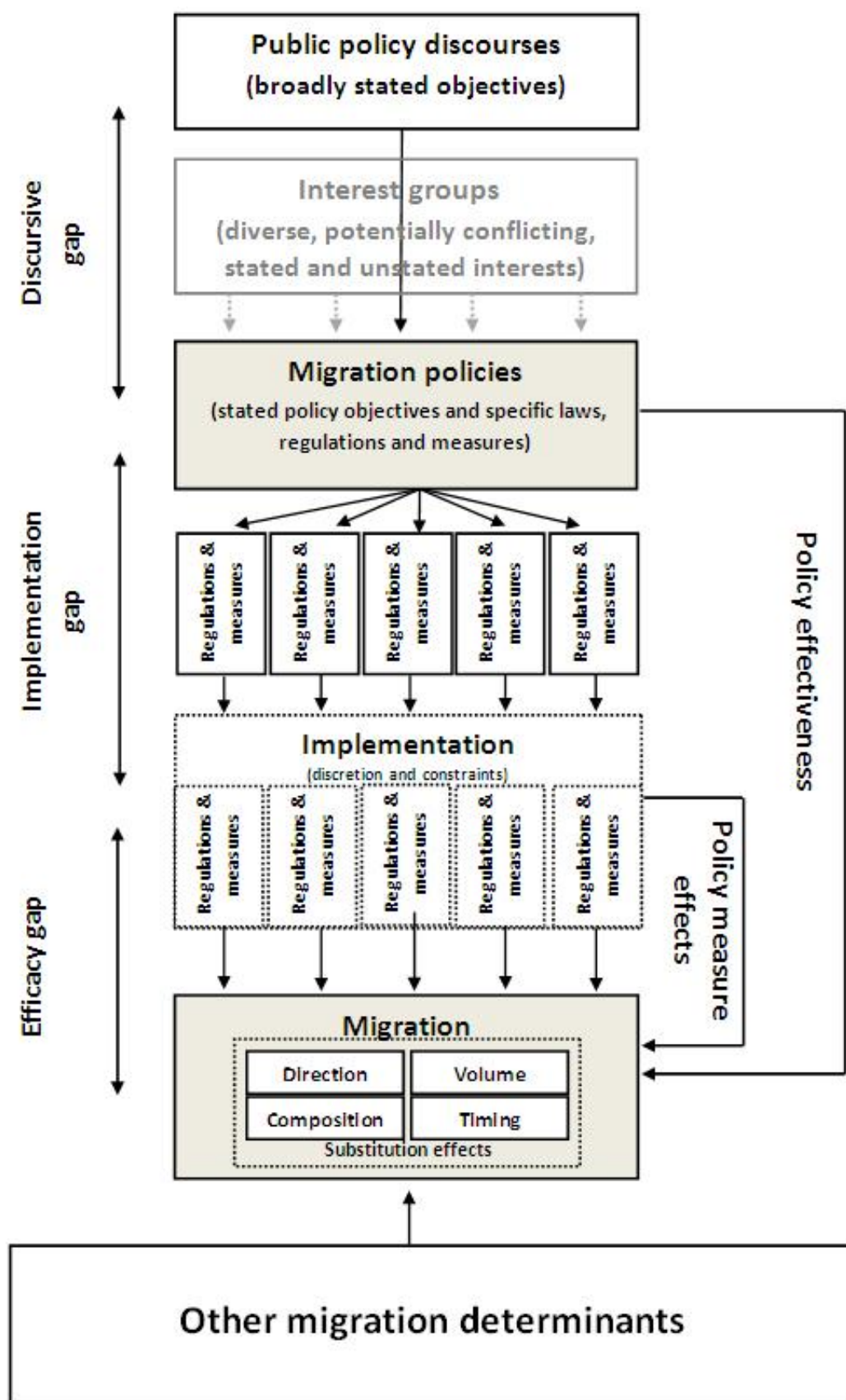
Czaika and De Haas (2011a) identified three policy gaps which can explain perceived or real policy failure. First, the ‘discourse gap’ is the considerable discrepancy between the stated objectives of politicians’ migration discourses and rhetoric on the one hand and *concrete* policies on the other. Second, the ‘implementation gap’ is the frequent disparity between policies on paper and their actual implementation. Third, the ‘efficacy’ gap is the extent to which an implemented policy has the capacity to affect migration flows (see Figure 1). While questioning the common assumption that migration policies have become more restrictive overall, they argued that studies should use *concrete* policies rather than public discourses as an evaluative benchmark; since the policy will almost always be construed as a failure if official, ‘tough’ immigration discourses are taken as a reference.

## **6 Hypothesizing substitution effects of migration policies**

The migration policy literature has argued that immigration policies frequently fail because they have several unintended, often counter-productive effects. Within the framework developed in this paper, migrants’ agency – in particular their creative ability to defy immigration rules by adopting new migration strategies and pathways – plays a key role in explaining such unintended effects. However, the existence and strength of such ‘perverse’ effects is highly contested, and therefore requires better empirical testing. It is reasonable to assume that migration policies, if implemented, must have some effect on migration. The crucial questions are: which effects, and what is the relative importance of these effects compared to other migration determinants. In order to create conceptual clarity, it is useful to distinguish the effect of migration policies on the following:

1. the volume of migration
2. the spatial orientation of migration
3. the composition (legal channel and migrant characteristics) of migration
4. the timing of migration
5. reverse (return) migration

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of migration policy effects and effectiveness<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Mathias Czaika and Simona Vezzoli for their contributions to Figure 1.

Recent reviews of immigration policies (Czaika and de Haas 2011a) and emigration policies (de Haas and Vezzoli 2011) lead to the hypothesis that policies are more effective in determining the selection and composition of migration rather than the overall volume and long-term trends of migration. However, the impact of policies on migration volumes of the particularly targeted category (e.g. asylum seekers or family migrants) receive most if not all attention, which is unfortunate as the effects on other flows are crucial in understanding the structural and long-term effects of migration policies on overall migration flows.

Based on the above analysis, I hypothesize that immigration restrictions can potentially lead to four main types of *substitution effects* which can reduce the effect of restrictions on inflows in the particular, targeted category:

1. **Spatial substitution effects** may occur through the diversion of migration to countries with less restrictive regulations for similar categories of migrants. There is some largely descriptive evidence observing such spatial substitution effects for asylum, family and irregular migration to Europe and North America. In the Dutch language, such spatial substitution effects have also been dubbed as the ‘waterbed effect’ (Grütters 2003; van der Erf 2003).
2. **Categorical substitution effects** may occur due to a reorientation towards other legal or illegal channels when entry through one particular channel becomes more difficult. For instance, it has frequently been argued that the lack of immigration channels for low-skilled labour migrants has compelled migration through family, asylum or student migration channels by people who basically migrated to work (de Haas 2007; Harris 2002; Massey 2004) and that it has increased irregular migration (Castles 2004b; de Haas 2008; van Liempt and Doomernik 2006).
3. **Inter-temporal substitution effects** or ‘now or never migration’ may occur if migration surges in the expectation of a future tightening of migration regulations. For instance, it has been argued that when the Federal Republic of Germany tried to discourage family reunification in the late 1970s, family migration to the Federal Republic *increased*, since many migrants feared that, eventually, family reunification might be forbidden completely (Entzinger 1985: 267). There was a surge in Surinamese migration to the Netherlands in the 1970s around independence (Van Amersfoort 2010), and a surge in West Indian migration before 1962, when restrictions were introduced with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (Peach 1968). Such effects have also been described for asylum migration (Grütters 2003). After the introduction of more restrictions, immigration typically shows a sharp fall. The long-term effect of such restrictions may thus be limited by the pre-measure surge in inflows.
4. **Reverse flow substitution effects** occur when immigration restrictions decrease return migration flows. Several studies have argued that restrictive immigration policies discourage return migration and therefore push migrants into permanent settlement. This phenomenon has been described for Turkish and Moroccan ‘guest worker’ migration to north-west Europe, where many temporary workers ended up settling after the post 1973 recruitment ban (Böcker 1994; Castles and Miller 2009; Entzinger 1985). If migration restrictions decrease inflows but simultaneously also decrease return flows, their effect on *net* inflows becomes much more ambiguous. However, such hypotheses have not been subjected to empirical tests.

These four hypotheses about the unintended effects of policy restrictions need to be taken into account when measuring the effect of particular policies on migration flows. Decreases in restrictiveness are likely to have the opposite effect, and restrictive emigration policies can also have more or less similar spatial, categorical, inter-temporal and reverse flow substitution effects. As has been argued above, the danger of exclusively focusing on the particular inflow targeted by the policy is to over-estimate its effect. It is only by focusing on the effects of policy on overall migration flows through other spatial and legal channels and over a longer time period that a more comprehensive and methodologically valid picture can be obtained.

Additional hypotheses can be elaborated on the policy effects of frequently used *non-restrictive* policy instruments. Examples may include the oft-assumed ‘pull effect’ of legalizations of irregular migrants, which have made such policies politically controversial. However, the existence of such pull effects has been contested based on descriptive quantitative analyses (Sandell 2006), indicating that this hypothesis needs proper testing. Another example is the effect of labour recruitment agreements. It has been argued that their effect is much lower than often hypothesized (Reniers 1999; Shadid 1979), but here also there is an absence of adequate, empirical tests.

Besides measuring the direct effects of migration policies on the volume of flows within the migration category (for instance, by origin, skill, or gender group) targeted by specific policies, empirical analyses within the DEMIG project will focus on testing for these various substitution effects in order to acquire a more comprehensive empirical insight into the effects of migration policies. It goes without saying that empirical analyses will control for other theoretically relevant sending- and receiving-country migration determinants derived from the conceptual framework developed in this paper.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that although the effectiveness of migration policies has been widely contested in the face of their supposed failure to steer immigration and their hypothesized counter-productive effects, empirical evidence has remained inconclusive as a consequence of fundamental methodological and conceptual limitations. Although the general migration policy literature has yielded a rich set of hypotheses on possible policy effects, empirical evidence is mostly descriptive or anecdotal. At the same time, the migration determinants literature suffers from methodological problems and is largely based on obsolete and theoretically uninformed push-pull and gravity models, and is biased by omitting crucial sending-country, non-economic and policy factors. The scholarly analysis of policy effects has remained under-theorized, and poorly connected to general migration theory.

Because of this lack of precision and specification, it remains unclear how migration policies affect migration flows when other forces driving international migration are taken into account. Most empirical models miss out the ‘big picture’ by focusing on short-term fluctuations on particular migration flows and do not take into account the impact of policies on overall and long-term migration patterns and trends.

More fundamentally, the contested nature of this debate reveals a still limited understanding of the forces driving international migration and the lack of theoretically driven research. Although there is consensus that macro-contextual economic and political

factors and meso-level factors such as networks all play ‘some’ role, there is no agreement on their relative weight and mutual interaction. To start filling this gap, this paper outlined the contours of a conceptual framework for generating improved insights into the ways states and policies shape migration processes in their interaction with structural migration determinants in receiving and sending countries.

In this paper, I tried to argue that the current research impasse can only be overcome by firmly embedding the multi-method (quantitative and qualitative), longitudinal empirical analysis of policy effects into a more comprehensive theoretical framework of the macro- and meso-level forces driving international migration. I have argued that the fragmented insights from different disciplinary theories can be integrated in one model through conceptualizing virtually all manifestations of migration (internal and international) as a function of *capabilities* and *aspirations* to migrate. I also proposed a set of hypotheses on perverse ‘substitution effects’ of migration policies which can guide future empirical research.

However, the limited ability of prior research to assess the role of states and policies and migration processes is not only linked to theoretical problems, but also to concomitant methodological problems and important limitations. The DEMIG project aims to address these three problems simultaneously. In a future paper, I intend to further work out methodological and empirical approaches for testing policy, origin and destination effects. Nevertheless, from this paper it may already be clear that, in order to be tested, the key hypotheses about potential substitution effects require particular data and methodological approaches.

First of all, spatial substitution effects can only be studied through ‘double comparative’ approaches which simultaneously study the migration of multiple origin groups to and from multiple destination countries.<sup>13</sup> Such double comparative analyses require the availability of bilateral (country-to-country) flow data. Also for studying inter-temporal substitution effects, a key requirement is the availability of bilateral flow data which preferably spans several decades. The theoretical relevance of reverse flow substitution effects reveals the need to consider immigration and emigration as separate social phenomena (‘net migration’ largely being a statistical artefact with little sociological meaning) which require aggregate and, preferably, bilateral migration data that differentiate between outflows and inflows. The study of categorical substitution effects requires migration flow data which differentiate between the different migrant categories.

Therefore, besides the development of a conceptual framework the contours of which have been presented in this paper, the second aim of the DEMIG project is to create a longitudinal database compiling bilateral (country-to-country) migration flow data over the 1950–2010 period, based on flow data collected from national statistical offices and other sources – particularly, but not exclusively, from OECD countries. A third aim and project activity is to systematically review receiving- and sending-country migration policies (cf. Czaika and de Haas 2011a; de Haas and Vezzoli 2011), which will result in methodological choices with regards to the operationalization of particular migration policy instruments (e.g. visas, bilateral agreements, recruitment) on which to focus the empirical analyses. In fact, the parsimonious operationalization of migration policies is the key challenge facing

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<sup>13</sup> A similar approach has been used by Van Tubergen et al. (2004) in studying the economic incorporation of immigrants in 18 Western countries.

this project and migration determinants research more generally. Subsequently, this framework will be subjected to empirical tests drawing on gross and bilateral (country-to-country) migration flow data.

However, it is important to emphasize that not all problems can be ‘fixed’ just by collecting better data and specifying better quantitative models. Ultimately, empirical research should be theory- and not data-driven, and the point is that many theoretically relevant structural factors are indeed difficult to quantify. There are serious limitations in the availability of reliable indicators and it would also be naïve to assume that such indicators can capture all relevant dimensions (e.g. the concepts of ‘power’, ‘exclusion’, ‘racism’, ‘discrimination’ or ‘migration policy’) of such structural features. Empirical-quantitative models should be improved as much as possible. However, this cannot solve all problems, and the ‘non-quantifiability’ of certain factors should not be a reason to ignore them.

To combine the different strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches, *methodological triangulation* seems to be a more promising avenue. Such an approach systematically combines formal quantitative tests of key indicators using panel datasets with detailed case studies studying the relation between transformations of economic structures and labour markets and migration patterns for particular countries or regional blocks. Such case studies should provide an empirically ‘thick’, informed description, supplemented, whenever possible, with exploratory quantitative analysis. This can serve to develop new ideas and hypotheses as well as a ‘plausibility-check’ of results generated by formal tests. Policy reviews should also include a qualitative assessment of the effects and effectiveness of these policies, from which hypotheses can be derived. Because much information on policies will be lost through quantification, the qualitative review and categorization of migration policies has a value in itself, and contributes to the improvement of the conceptual framework.

Methodological heterodoxy and true interdisciplinary openness are therefore central conditions for advancing research on migration determinants. Through creatively integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, it is possible to increase insights into the nature and evolution of migration policies and their effects on the size, direction, timing and composition of migration flows. Eventually, such an open, creative and flexible approach will enhance our ability to create a generalized theoretical understanding of the determinants of international migration.

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