

Why Do People Migrate? Myth and Reality

by Vatana Chea

Thanks to globalization and international cooperation, we are now living in an era which many researchers dub “the age of migration” – a period of mass movement of global population. Statistically speaking, United Nations estimated that there were roughly 173 million international migrants worldwide in 2000, but that stock jumped to 258 million in 2017. Without mobility restrictions such as visa and work permits, it is not surprising that internal migration rate is even much higher. But such phenomenon is not an absolutely new episode. Migration has been happening for quite a long time. You may remember the migration of European population to the “New World”, that is, the American and Australian continents. However, mass mobility is recently more prevalent due to better and cheaper transportation and communication facilities.

You may be aware of migration situation at least in your own country or might have migrated yourself multiple times in the past. But have you ever asked yourself why are people migrating? Conventional wisdom suggests that it is the economic opportunities such as high wage, political freedom, and better living/working conditions at the destination countries or cities within a country. Even though it sounds reasonable enough, it is not entirely correct, and it also reflects a lack of understanding in the causes of migration. Why? Because it will not explain why many more people in the same country with the same poverty do not migrate (no, they are not bad at a simple mathematics). Migration is an extremely complicated phenomenon while motives for migration are manifold. In this article, I will redress some well-known misconceptions about the reasons for migration and present plain evidence to argue.

1. **Increase development will definitely reduce migration, and emigration will cease when the country becomes developed.** I start this myth first, as vast majority of people believe that poverty and low development level in the third world countries are sole factors that drive international migration. It is worth noting that developed countries such as UK and Germany simultaneously experience huge immigration and substantial emigration. However, it is also naïve to deny that inequality of income worldwide plays a crucial role in explaining migration. But bear in mind that migration is a selective not a random process, and thereby not all poor people will migrate even if they are given the opportunities. On the contrary, boosting economic development and infrastructure may increase ability to migrate.

2. **Migrants are poor and low-educated.** In fact, extreme poverty impedes migration due to the high cost of travelling and other associated cost. Improved education can also raise people's aspiration to migrate, as they have better knowledge and access to information necessary for migration. In 2017, United Kingdoms, Poland, and Germany, to name a few, are among the top fifteen countries that send international migrants. Thus, migrants are not always poor or politically oppressed otherwise they are essentially deprived of capability to migrate elsewhere. More importantly, it is a serious mistake to think that the rich do not migrate.
3. **People migrate from the poorest to the richest countries.** Again, it is a misunderstanding to assume that economic factor alone is the reason of migration. The reality is that people do not always migrate from the poorest to wealthiest countries. On the contrary, the majority of international migrants move between developing world. Developing countries such as Russia, Thailand, India, Pakistan and Ukraine are among the countries hosting millions of migrants from other developing countries. Distance actually explains why United States is the main destination for migrants from Latin American, and why international migrants in Europe are mainly from Africa and the Middle East.
4. **Wage gap is the motivation for migration.** It is at best a platitude because migrants do not always have perfect knowledge about wage level and employment opportunities at the destination. Many migrants find themselves migrating with risks and uncertainties. As some researchers have insisted, real-life migration is strongly patterned and deviates from common perspectives. There are other factors that contribute to migration such as laws, politics, colonial history, culture, structural constraints, and thereby migration can continue to exist without such a gap in wage. If migration is attributed mainly to wage difference, how can we explain migration between developed and developed countries? And why people return to their countries of origin even the situation there does not change?
5. **Individual's decision to migrate is purely based on cost-benefit calculation.** Individuals are not the sole actors in migration decision. It can involve other members of the household and community. In migration research, such notion is called migration network theory which proves that meso-factors often influence migration decision. For example, households may force its members into migration to earn remittances (yes, they do). Migrants are also subject to cultural pressures from the community which views international migrants as some kind of heroes or agents of economic development, and those who do not migrate are deemed frail and fragile. This is particularly true in some Southeast Asian countries where some people migrate because everyone else does so if it is feasible.

6. **Most migrants are males compelled to migrate to earn remittances and support their family.** Females are actually more migratory than males in domestic migration. Feminization of migration is proven by many datasets such as the Cambodia Rural-Urban Migration Survey in 2011 (in the case of my country) which finds that internal migration is largely populated by females rather than males. The same notion, however, has not yet applied to international migration. But according to UN statistics, women comprise 48 percent of all international migrants in 2017, and they outnumber male migrants in Europe, Oceania, North America and Latin America and the Caribbean.
7. **Low fertility rate hence shortage of labor supply at the destination is the reason why it draws so many migrant workers.** It is naïve to assume that. The fertility rate of China has remained low for years (One-Child Policy), but so far it has not been a main destination for international migrants. Until most recently, Japan has been an example of country with low fertility and low immigration rate. Likewise, some Eastern European countries with low fertility also experience high emigration rate whereas the Gulf countries are receiving many immigrants despite having high fertility themselves. Moreover, population pressure can lead to innovation in the sending countries such as the Green Revolution – the introduction of new crops, fertilizer, pesticide, and technology in agriculture.
8. **Migrants are passive victims of global capitalism who have no choice but to migrate in order to survive.** This is what Ronald Skeldon called common “myths of immobile peasants” who believe that migration ruins peaceful, harmonious, and self-sufficient egalitarian communities of the farmers to serve mainly interests of the bourgeois elites who are getting richer due to unfair exploitation of labor. This perception ignores entirely the facts that most migrations are voluntary, and individuals actively make decision. In addition, it does not take into account that remittances significantly improve many poor people living condition whereas the traditional agrarian societies were synonymous with high level of poverty, famine, and mortality.
9. **Environmental degradation directly results in mass migration.** Again, environmental pressure does not necessarily lead to exodus. It can also encourage innovation. Reviewing state-of-the-art empirical research, The Foresight Report in 2011 (published by UK Government Office for Science) concludes that there is currently no research without unsound methodology proving that environmental and climate change do induce mass out-migration, as migration itself is a multi-causal phenomenon. In fact, by ignoring more powerful factors such as economic and social processes, environmentalists cannot explain why people living in “risk zones” do not migrate. In a Southeast Asian country – Cambodia again, where majority of its territory is covered with forest, deforestation has actually decreased international migration rate because clearing land equally means more cultivated land, more work, more

agricultural productions, and more income. Consequently, there is no need for such migration to another country.

10. **Building a wall will successfully prevent migration.** It will only reduce migration by making it more difficult, but I highly doubt that it will stop migration unless the receiving country prepares to keep out all the immigrants by any means necessary. International migration is often subject to state's control albeit not always. One way or another, migrants will enter the country (or another country) and create a chain migration or migration network – a self-perpetuating process which increases the possibility of future migration. It is worth noting that an island country with natural wall such as the United Kingdom is hosting millions of irregular immigrants. Not to mention that the wall may eventually become a tourist attraction.

Recommended Reading:

Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. (2014). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (5th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan, Londra.