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Can targeted interventions mitigate the adverse drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement?

by Michel Beine, David Khoudour and Johannes Tarvainen



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Abstract

This paper discusses how targeted interventions, either at the local or sectoral level, may shape migration and forced displacement dynamics. To assess the channels through which public policies and development initiatives potentially affect human mobility intentions and outcomes, the paper first focuses on the many—and sometimes counterintuitive—reasons why people leave their countries of origin. The drivers of both ‘voluntary’ migration and forced displacement span all dimensions of people’s lives, including economic, social, political and environmental ones. The paper then analyses the empirical evidence on the observed impact of targeted interventions on the propensity to move, either by choice or by force. The literature on the consequences of local and sectoral interventions on the behaviour of individuals in terms of human mobility remains limited, and new approaches are needed to capture more consistently the different channels of transmission. The paper thus offers potential research avenues and methodological options for better understanding of how targeted interventions can contribute to mitigating the adverse drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement.

Executive summary

Human mobility not only represents an opportunity for people on the move and their families to improve their well-being, but it also contributes to enhancing the sustainable development of countries of origin and destination (UNDP, 2020). However, not everybody migrates by choice. Conflicts, insecurity and disasters, among others, can force people out of their home areas or countries. And even when the decision to migrate is a choice, many would-be migrants do not have access to regular pathways. But, because the potential benefits of moving abroad outnumber the perceived risks of irregular migration, many choose to endanger their lives in search of a better future in other countries.

Better understanding the reasons why people move is, therefore, key to trying to mitigate the adverse drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement, and reduce the human, economic and social costs they represent. In line with the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* and the *Global Compact on Refugees*, both adopted in 2018, as well as with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, such understanding can also help in assessing the specific role that public policies and development interventions may have in influencing individuals' propensity to move internationally— either by choice or force.

This paper analyses the possible **impact of targeted interventions at sectoral or local levels in countries of origin of potential migrants and forcibly displaced people**. Building on a review of academic literature on the determinants of migration and forced displacement, the paper proposes a **typology to explain why people move**, focusing on so-called push factors in countries of origin:

- i. The **migration context**, referring to the role of networks, the costs of and information on migration, and migration policies in origin and destination countries.
- ii. **Geography and demography**, such as the location of the country of origin, specificities linking the origin and destination of movement, and trends in age and population variation.
- iii. **Economic factors**, pointing to structural differentials in wage and employment opportunities, variations in business cycles, level of income and development at origin, and other considerations around employment and labour market institutions.
- iv. **Human capital and social context**, consisting of education and skill transferability, inequalities and social mobility, as well as health and social protection.
- v. **Governance**, including the quality of institutions and citizens' trust in their governments.
- vi. **Violence, insecurity and conflict**, ranging from civil wars and political upheavals, including their indirect social and economic effects, to individual-level impact.
- vii. **Environment and climate change**, looking at their complex relation with and often conditional or indirect effect on emigration.
- viii. **Gender**, with considerations around risk aversion and family migration, but also discrimination and higher sensitivities to violence and insecurity.

The paper investigates the relationship between international aid and targeted initiatives implemented in migrants' areas of origin on one side and emigration outcomes or intentions on the other. While recognizing the complex and indirect roles that aid programming can have on the propensity to move, the paper proposes **categorizing targeted interventions around seven main objectives**:

1. **Generating employment opportunities**, such as through the creation of employment agencies, public employment programmes and vocational training opportunities.
2. **Alleviating poverty**, looking at both conditional cash transfers and production subsidies.
3. **Protecting against adverse shocks** through, for instance, the provision of insurance mechanisms, increased social protection and better access to health services.
4. **Providing access to better information to prospective emigrants** on various steps related to departure and arrival.
5. **Strengthening social cohesion and governance** at both national and local levels.
6. **Preventing insecurity, violence and conflicts**, taking as examples stabilization interventions and initiatives seeking to inform evidence-based, gender-sensitive policies and programmes towards improving security.
7. **Mitigating consequences of climate change** with sectoral interventions aimed at creating climate-resilient activities, such as those around environmental degradation and disaster response and recovery.

While there is a growing concern among policymakers and development actors about the need to mitigate the adverse drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement, the means to do so are not clear. The fact that economic development tends to translate into more rather than less emigration from developing countries means that investing in development does not automatically lead to a reduction in migration pressures in most vulnerable countries, but targeted interventions at local or sectoral levels are still likely to affect the propensity to move.

The goal should not be to prevent people from migrating but to understand and address the causes and patterns of the most challenging forms of human mobility, such as irregular migration and forced displacement. The paper lays out methodological approaches to inform policy-designing tools that can help people migrate by choice and, to the extent possible, through legal pathways. A first step towards mitigating adverse drivers would be to design a tool that can help monitor different factors that influence people's propensity to move.

The paper suggests that current emigration rates, which are drawn from either actual movements or measurement of intentions to move, might be an insufficient predictor of future migration movements. To go beyond the simple use of current emigration rates, the paper suggests **designing and operationalizing a dashboard of key indicators alluding to emigration and forced displacement pressures**. The indicators should integrate past and current emigration rates at national and sub-national levels, as well as intentions to move abroad, determined, for instance, by responses to large-scale harmonized surveys.

Furthermore, the **dashboard could incorporate indicators in line with the typology of drivers presented in the paper by integrating key demographic, economic, social and environmental dimensions**, including indicators that are likely to induce forced displacement. The exact composition of these indicators and the optimal way to combine them should be developed in future research and informed by **practical testing of models** proposed.

The paper also recommends different **methodological avenues for measuring the impact of targeted**

interventions on individuals' propensity to move:

- Using **randomized controlled trials (RCTs)**, which randomly select beneficiaries and compare their outcomes with control groups. These can offer a solution for capturing the causal effect of targeted interventions. But RCTs may not be feasible for all types of programming, such as that targeting the whole community rather than specific individuals.
- As an alternative to RCTs, a **difference in difference approach (diff-in-diff)**, which collects data before and after the intervention, can measure effects of policy change that affect only a subset of communities. It represents a good option whenever it is possible to get a relevant comparison unit, such as a community or municipality with similar characteristics.
- An **evaluation of the bias** associated with simple ("naïve") statistical analyses remains possible if neither of the previous solutions can be applied. It implies evaluating the potential error in the assessment of the average outcome with and without an intervention (counterfactual analysis) between the beneficiaries of such intervention and others who have not benefited from it.

The observations and recommended follow-up measures listed in the paper rely on the notion that—despite the methodological challenges implied with measuring and evaluating the impact of targeted interventions on human mobility—it is critical to develop and implement tools that will improve our understanding of how development actors can efficiently address adverse drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement.

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