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# How Does Migration Arise?



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# How Does Migration Arise?

Jørgen Carling

## Executive summary

Ambitious policy documents such as the *New York Declaration* are phrased in very general terms, yet require action that is based on more specific understandings of the processes at work. This paper seeks to lay out—in a comprehensive yet concise way—how migration comes about. It stops short of prescribing particular policy interventions, but lays the foundation for identifying how migration dynamics and their outcomes may be shaped by government policy.

The paper presents a model of migration that draws upon recent developments in migration theory. It is broadly applicable across different categories of migrants, including refugees. The model is built around three steps:

1. *The formation of a desire for change.* This is driven by people's current conditions, their perception of prospects for the future, and their life aspirations. The desire for change may be focused on personal security, living conditions, professional development, or other spheres of life.
2. *The channelling of a desire for change into migration aspirations.* People could respond to a desire for change by seeking a future elsewhere. Alternatively, they could pursue local opportunities—either for changing their personal circumstances or contributing to social change. These responses could be constructive (e.g. pursuing education, entrepreneurship, or political activism) or destructive (e.g. radicalization or violent mobilization).
3. The outcomes of migration aspirations. A wish to migrate could be converted into actual migration, depended on opportunities and resources. But it could also result in an *unsuccessful migration attempt* in the form of death, being trapped *en route*, or having to return against one's will. A third outcome is involuntary immobility—wishing to leave but being unable to do so. This is a largely invisible outcome, but a potentially damaging one for individuals and communities.

The idea of containing migration by addressing route causes is fashionable but misguided. The model illustrates the potential pitfalls and shortcomings of such an objective. Instead, policy should specifically seek to reduce the number of unsuccessful migration attempts and the extent of involuntary immobility.

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals include a call for 'orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people' (target 10.7) as a pathway to reducing global inequalities.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2016, supports 'safe, orderly and regular migration'. The Declaration includes specific language on addressing the root causes of migration, making the most of the potential benefits of migration, and preventing human suffering in the context of migration.<sup>2</sup>

Ambitious policy documents such as the New York Declaration are phrased in very general terms, yet require action that is based on more specific understandings of the processes at work. This paper seeks to lay out—in

1 United Nations General Assembly (2015).

2 United Nations General Assembly (2016).

a comprehensive yet concise way—how migration comes about. It stops short of prescribing particular policy interventions, but lays the foundation for identifying how migration dynamics and their outcomes may be shaped by government policy.<sup>3</sup>

The question in the title—‘How does migration come about?’—is carefully phrased. It alludes to dynamic *processes* at work. By contrast, asking ‘what are the causes of migration?’ or ‘why do people migrate?’ suggest a static list of causes or motivations.

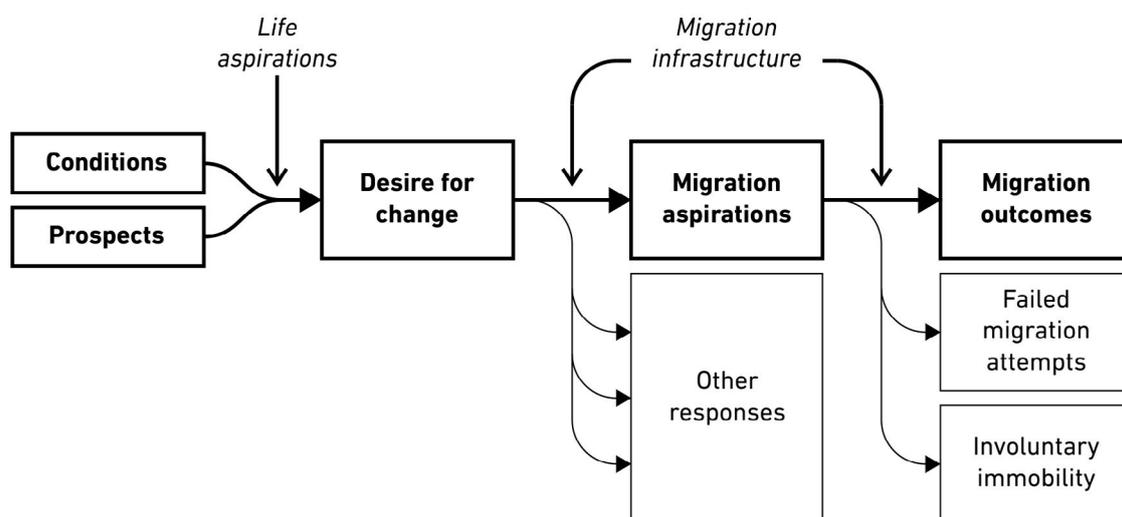
## The notion of root causes

The idea of managing migration through addressing ‘root causes’ became part of European policy in the 1980s and gained popularity through the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> By the 2000s, the root-causes doctrine had become engrained in European policy thinking about migration and development.<sup>5</sup> It has partly been a dormant idea, however, and re-emerged in an unprecedented way with the establishment of the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa in 2015.

The notion of ‘root causes’ appears to have originated in debates about conflict-driven displacement.<sup>6</sup> In this field attempts to tackle root causes have centred on humanitarian action to prevent violence, end human rights abuses, and facilitate peace-building. The preventative logic has been transferred to economically motivated migration where the assumption has been that migration can be stemmed by alleviating poverty and creating jobs. Since the 1990s, the two fields have partly merged, as governments and international agencies increasingly recognize the mixed nature of migration flows and migration motivations.

The ‘root causes’ approach appears intuitive and welcome, but is, in fact, analytically weak and politically problematic. Researchers have demonstrated that socio-economic development in poor countries tends to *increase* migration rather than reduce it.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the idea of poverty as a ‘root cause’ of migration is misleading, even if individual migrants feel that they are compelled by poverty. Armed conflict, repression, and societal breakdown can more easily be seen as causes of migration. But, politically and ethically, that is not how these issues should be framed by the international community. People’s suffering should be addressed because it is a humanitarian concern, not because suffering people could become mobile.

Figure 1. A model of the mechanisms that produce migration



3 Parts of the text are revised content from Carling and Talleraas (2016). I am grateful to comments from participants at ‘Ideas to inform international cooperation on safe, orderly and regular migration’ Migration Research Leaders Syndicate, International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 28–29 September 2017.

4 Castles and Van Hear (2011). Although the term ‘root causes’ was introduced in the 1990s, there is a longer history of attempting to limit economic migration through development of the regions of origin.

5 Crush (2015:42).

6 The arguments in this paragraph draw upon Castles and Van Hear (2011), who provide the most thorough analysis of the root causes doctrine in migration policy thinking.

7 Carling and Talleraas (2016), Clemens (2014), de Haas (2007).

## A desire for change

Figure 1 displays a model of migration that does away with the notion of root causes. It reflects newer approaches to migration theory that see migration as the outcome of, first, the formation of migration aspirations, and second, the ability to realize those aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

The model is a general framework for all types of migration, including refugee flows. While refugees are a distinct category in legal terms, the difference with other migrants is not an analytically clear-cut one. There is enormous variation in the balance of choice and constraint among migrants, and this variation does not map neatly onto legal classifications.

As shown in Figure 1, the origins of migration lie in the *conditions* of states, communities, and individuals that underlie a *desire for change*, which, in turn, produces *migration aspirations*. A desire for change means a recognition that action is needed to alter the course of one's life—be it to ensure survival, escape repression, finance children's education, fulfil professional ambitions, or other reasons. Across these diverse circumstances, it matters that there is a difference between the present conditions and the desired state of affairs.

The effect of present conditions interacts with the *prospects* for improvement. It is often not destitution that makes people turn to migration, but rather a feeling of inescapable stagnation.<sup>9</sup> If there is hope that things will get better, hardships might be easier to endure. Whether or not certain conditions and prospects create a desire for change also depends on peoples' *life aspirations*. For instance, it matters to what extent poor people can imagine, and actively seek, a better life.<sup>10</sup> If a country experiences rapid but uneven growth, *conditions* might not change much for the majority of poor people, and the *prospects* for improvement might be dim. But their *life aspirations* could rise in response to other people's visible wealth.

## Migration aspirations

People who desire change might seek it in myriad ways, individually or collectively. Some develop *migration aspirations*. This term is commonly used to describe preferences or desires for migration, regardless of the context and the urgency of the desire.<sup>11</sup> Civilians threatened by conflict, university graduates faced with unemployment, and farmers hurt by environment degradation might all reach the conclusion that their best option is to leave. They can then all be said to have migration aspirations. This is the first step towards actually migrating.

The concept of 'migration aspirations' might seem at odds with the notion of forced migration. Surely, people who are forcibly displaced have no wish to move? They do in the sense that they have considered the options and considered flight the best strategy for survival. The point becomes clearer by considering all those who make the same assessment but lack the resources to escape.<sup>12</sup> ('Forced migration' is increasingly abandoned in favour of other terms, such as 'wartime migration'<sup>13</sup> or 'survival migration'<sup>14</sup>, which are more aligned with the dynamics at work.)

8 Carling (2002), Carling and Schewel (in press), de Haas (2014), Docquier *et al.* (2014).

9 See, for instance, Frederiksen (2013), Hernandez-Carretero and Carling (2012), Mains (2007, 2011).

10 Appadurai (2004) examines this in terms of 'capacity to aspire'.

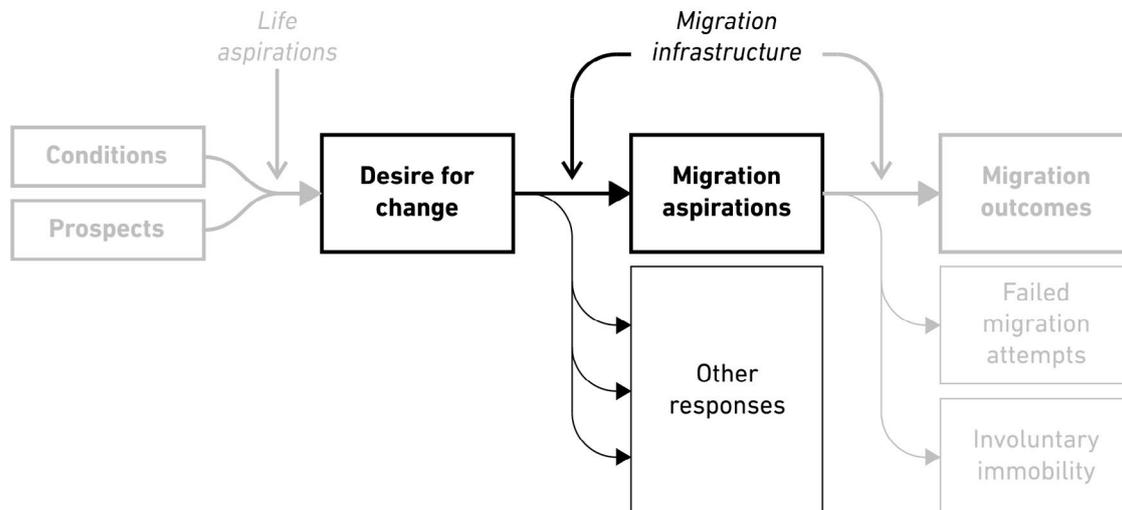
11 Carling and Schewel (in press).

12 Black and Collyer (2014), Carling (2002), Lubkemann (2008b).

13 Lubkemann (2008a).

14 Betts (2013).

Figure 2. A model of the mechanisms that produce migration (focus on the formation of migration aspirations)



When people develop a desire for change in their lives, directing this desire towards migration is only one possibility. As Figure 2 highlights, there are also paths that lead to other responses. The range of possible responses depends on the context. For instance, inhabitants of a country with a dictatorial regime could seek to escape, but they could also fight for change, or protect themselves through allegiance to the regime in power. Versions of these three options—presented as ‘exit, voice, and loyalty’ in a classic framework<sup>15</sup>—often apply.

Another situation that often spurs migration—or other responses—is the blockage of transition to independent adulthood. The ensuing frustrations are not simply about poverty, but also about social and political structures that marginalize young people. Migration is one possible response, but so is joining an insurgency or vigilante group.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the ‘root causes’ of migration are also root causes of other, no less important phenomena.

A desire for change can also be a positive force. The frustrations and energies that turn people towards migration could conceivably be channelled to education, or entrepreneurship for instance. But that requires the right conditions. Education must be accessible and have a real impact on job prospects; the business environment must be conducive to small-scale entrepreneurship.

Where people direct their desires for change depend on the *relative* appeal and feasibility of the different possible responses. Even when it is risky, migration can hold greater promise of a better future than the alternatives. Conversely, when migration is blocked, people could be more inclined to other responses, such as joining violent movements.<sup>17</sup>

Migration might not feature as a possibility in people’s minds. But it probably will if many others have already left the same community. Few things predict migration as much as social networks with past migrants.<sup>18</sup> This is one aspect of *migration infrastructure*, a concept that was recently introduced to migration theory. As indicated in Figure 2, migration infrastructure affects the likelihood that people’s desire for change will be directed towards migration aspirations.

Migration infrastructure consists of the diverse human and non-human elements that enable and shape migration.<sup>19</sup> They can be grouped into five dimensions: the commercial (brokers, smugglers), the regulatory

15 Hirschman (1970).

16 Vigh (2006).

17 Ware (2005).

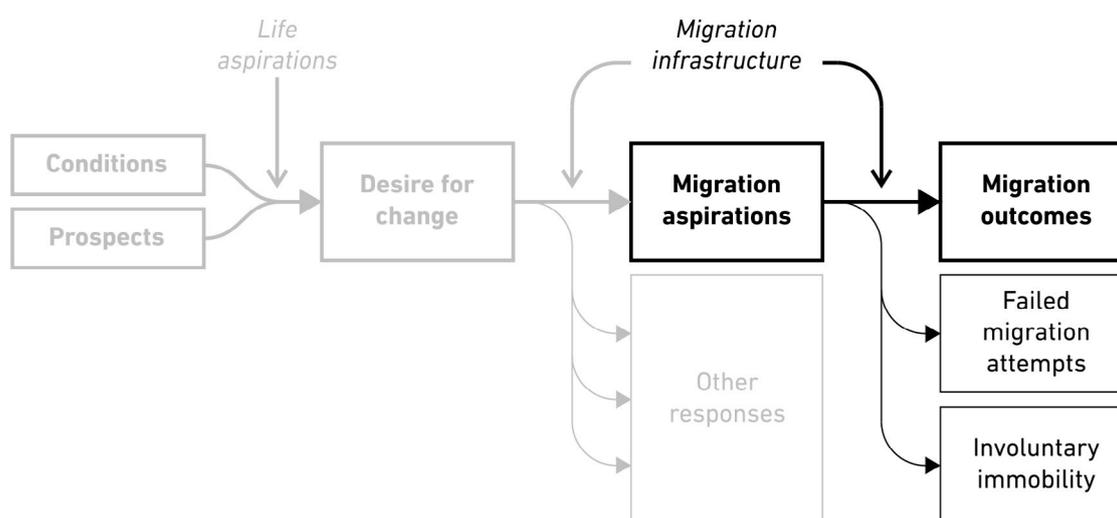
18 Cohen and Sirkeci (2011), Faist (2000), McKenzie and Rapoport (2007).

19 Xiang and Lindquist (2014).

(state apparatus and procedures), the technological (communication, transport), the humanitarian (NGOs and international organizations), and the social (migrant networks).

Importantly, migration infrastructure plays two distinct roles. First, it affects how people perceive the possibility of migration and whether or not they develop migration aspirations. Second, migration infrastructure affects whether or not such aspirations are realized.

Figure 3. A model of the mechanisms that produce migration (focus on migration outcomes)



## Migration outcomes

As Figure 3 illustrates, migration aspirations are one step removed from actual migration. And this is a decisive step. Survey data from the Gallup World Poll suggest that about 14 per cent of the world population would like to migrate permanently to another country.<sup>20</sup> This is a much higher proportion than the 3 per cent who have actually migrated. The share of people who want to migrate varies greatly by region and country. Nowhere is it greater than in West Africa (39 per cent). Other regions with a high proportion of potential migrants are the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa (29 per cent), Non-OECD European countries (24 per cent), North Africa (24 per cent) and South and Central America (21 per cent).<sup>21</sup>

Having a wish to migrate is not the same as acting upon it. Both the Gallup World Poll and other surveys have therefore asked additional questions about plans and preparations.<sup>22</sup> In the case of West Africa, 5 per cent plan to move within the next 12 months, and 2 per cent have started making preparations. These are much smaller proportions than the 39 per cent who express migration aspirations, but still represent substantial numbers of people (20 million and 6 million, respectively).

For people who have developed migration aspirations, there are essentially three possible outcomes (Figure 3). First, they could succeed in migrating. This does not imply that migration is a ‘success’ for the individual, but it means reaching the destination. Possibilities for converting migration aspirations into actual migration depend on migration regulations, access to information, social networks, and other dimensions of migration infrastructure.

The second possible result of migration aspirations is a failed migration attempt. The most extreme—but not uncommon—form of failure is death. Several thousand people die every year in the attempt to migrate.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Esipova and Ray (2009), Esipova *et al.* (2011).

<sup>21</sup> OECD (2015).

<sup>22</sup> Laczko *et al.* (2017), OECD (2015).

<sup>23</sup> Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (2016).

Many others are apprehended and returned soon after arriving. In addition, thousands of migrants manage to leave home, but get stuck on the way. For instance, many Sub-Saharan Africans headed for Europe are trapped in North Africa without the means to make the final leg of the journey. Failed migration attempts are a serious burden also for migrants' families and communities of origin.

The third type of outcome occurs when migration aspirations are thwarted at the outset and people fail to leave. They are then in a situation of *involuntary immobility*.<sup>24</sup> This is a largely invisible outcome, but nevertheless a consequential one. When people have their hopes pinned on leaving, they are less likely to invest resources in local livelihoods and locally relevant skills. Even in communities where emigration has brought significant benefits, involuntary immobility can drain resources away from development processes. In the context of humanitarian crises, involuntary immobility can exacerbate hardships and increase the number of fatalities.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

The 'root causes' agenda is focused on restricting migration that is seen as problematic. The chain of mechanisms presented in Figures 1–3 implies that there are many possible strategies for doing so. But just as important, the chain raises questions about what objectives should be.

The different strategies have different implications for the lives of individuals and the development of communities of origin. When migration is prevented in conventional ways, through restrictive immigration policies, it can result in involuntary immobility. It can also make people direct their desires for change towards other responses, which may be disruptive or detrimental to development processes.

If policy interventions are successfully directed at earlier stages in the chain—towards the left-hand side of the Figures 1–3—people would stay because they want to, and not because they are blocked from leaving. The potential for such a strategy lies not only in creating jobs, raising standards of living, and eliminating repression and violent conflict, but also in nurturing foundations for hope. Prospects for social mobility and social change are crucial. For instance, it is not only *provision of* education that matters, but equally important, *returns to* education.

## Recommendations

- Policy objectives that seek to address the so-called 'root causes' should focus not on containing migration, but rather on reducing (1) the number of unsuccessful migration attempts and (2) the extent of involuntary immobility. The negative consequences of involuntary immobility are theoretically plausible, but not yet well-researched.
- Unsuccessful migration attempts may be possible to avert through communication activities. But current efforts of this kind suffer from a mismatch between official messages and prospective migrants' other sources of information.<sup>26</sup>
- Involuntary immobility can be reduced by expanding migration opportunities and/or contributing to lowering migration aspirations. The latter is primarily a matter of establishing faith in local futures. This is an elusive but extremely important policy objective that is not well reflected in the SDGs.
- Development cooperation should, as a rule, not be reoriented towards reaching migration management objectives. Such reorientation carries risks of making development interventions less effective, and at the same time not contributing successfully towards better migration management.

<sup>24</sup> Carling (2002).

<sup>25</sup> Black and Collyer (2014).

<sup>26</sup> See Alpes and Sørensen (2015), Schans and Optekamp (2016).

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