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de Haas, Hein

DOI

[10.1186/s40878-025-00481-9](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-025-00481-9)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Comparative Migration Studies

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de Haas, H. (2025). Towards a global migration paradigm: And the imperative of ridding ourselves of the 'push-pull' model. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 13, Article 76. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-025-00481-9>

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COMMENTARY

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Towards a global migration paradigm

And the imperative of ridding ourselves of the 'push-pull' model

Hein de Haas^{1*}

*Correspondence:

Hein de Haas

h.g.dehaas@uva.nl

¹University of Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Migration studies is a strikingly undertheorized field of social inquiry. Over three decades ago, in their seminal review of migration theories, Massey and his colleagues (Massey et al., 1993, p. 432) concluded that much thinking on migration “remains mired in nineteenth-century concepts, models, and assumptions. Unfortunately, not much has changed since then. This reveals a lack of research interest in studying actual *processes* of migration, as well as a concomitant overall inability to conceptualize migration as an *intrinsic part* of broader processes of national and global change. It also reveals a broader bias within migration studies towards (1) the *impacts* of immigration on (2) Western *destination* societies. This ‘receiving-country bias’ has led to a one-sided focus on issues such as integration, segregation, race and identity from a Western perspective. This has gone along with a striking lack of interest in, and research on, the causes and consequences of migration from the perspective of non-Western ‘sending countries’.

This bias is obviously very problematic. After all, how can we develop a realistic view on migration if we miss half the picture? As the Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad has argued, every immigrant is also an emigrant – but we typically ignore the second dimension (Sayad, 1977). Neglecting the ‘other side’ of migration has therefore obstructed a proper understanding of the nature and causes of human mobility. But all of this reflects a deeper conceptual problem: the essentializing nature of the entire polarity between ‘sending’ (‘origin’, ‘home’) and ‘receiving’ (‘destination’, ‘host’) countries. This mirrors simplistic geographical imaginaries of migration being essentially about a one-directional move from the ‘Global South’ to the ‘Global North’, in which countries – or entire world regions – are reduced to ‘sending’ or ‘receiving’ countries. Such crude spatial binaries reproduce imaginaries that totally misrepresent the complex reality of human mobility. For instance, one can frequently read that more and more countries are simultaneously countries of emigration and immigration. However, this seems a blatantly ahistorical view. Has that not always been the case?

The implicit portrayal of the so-called ‘Global South’ as one big ‘sending region’, not only ignores a long history of European colonial settlement as well as the movement of enslaved African workers (to the Americas and the Caribbean) and Asian indentured workers (particularly to the Caribbean and East Africa), but also overlooks significant

historical and contemporary ‘normal’ migration between countries in the ‘Global South’. There is virtually no place or society in the world that is not experiencing simultaneous in- and out-movement by workers, family migrants, students or refugees.

The reality of global migration strongly contrasts with the popular idea of a massive South-North exodus. The vast majority of migrants move within countries (approximately 13% of the world population) and most who do cross borders (about 3.4% of the world population) move to neighbouring countries (see de Haas, 2023). For instance, the large majority of sub-Saharan African migrants moves *within* the continent (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). Countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Libya, Gabon and South Africa are important destination countries in their own right. In fact, and in opposition with common stereotypes about African migration as a ‘desperate flight’ from violence, poverty and other forms of ‘human misery’, most Africans seem to move for similar reasons as people in the ‘Global North’: for work, study, to join family, or for adventure (Bakewell, 2009; Berriane et al., 2013).

While issues of integration and immigration policy are typically framed as exclusively Western issues, these are relevant for many low- and middle-countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, too (see Olofinbiyi, 2022; Ho et al., 2025). This highlights that the entire concept of South and North are rather nonsensical: There is no clear definition of the boundaries between ‘South’ and ‘North’, and hence there is no rationale for assuming that South-South migration should essentially be any different from South-North or North-North migration (Bakewell, 2009).

The push-pull model: a migration pseudoscience

This distorted, spatially dichotomous worldview strongly resonates with the simplistic binary of the ‘push-pull’ model. The exact historical origins of the push-pull model are unclear. It has been frequently misattributed to Lee (1966), which is striking as Lee does not use the push-pull terminology, and his model is actually much more sophisticated than common interpretations of the push-pull model¹. Push-pull models usually identify economic, environmental, and demographic factors which are assumed to push people out of countries of origin and pull them into destination countries. The research literature makes ubiquitous reference to the push-pull terminology which has also achieved near-total hegemony in school and university textbooks and popular narratives about migration peddled by media, pundits and politicians.

Despite their many differences, both historical-structural and neo-classic views on migration are – explicitly or implicitly – based on the push-pull model when it comes to analysing the ‘root causes’ of migration, with migration largely being seen as a function of geographical inequalities or ‘development disequilibria’. With regards to ‘South-North’ migration specifically, push-pull models typically portray migration as an outflow of a toxic cocktail of poverty, unemployment, violence, population growth and environmental degradation (de Haas, 2023).

¹ Reading Lee, one wonders how many authors who refer to Lee’s theory as the ‘push-pull model’ have actually read his 1966 article. First, Lee does not engage in simplistic binaries in which a homogenous group of ‘push factors’ at the origin juxtapose an equally homogeneous group of ‘pull factors’ at the destination. Second, Lee does not use the push or pull terminology, but rather speaks of plus and minus factors (and factors to which people are indifferent). Third, Lee argued that people take migration decisions on the basis of *perceived* differences in circumstances at the origin and destination – so what is a negative factor for one (potentially creating the desire to migrate), could be a positive factor for another person (potentially retaining that person). The latter is an implicit acknowledgement of the important role of subjective preferences and human agency in shaping aspirations to stay or to leave.

The push-pull framework seems attractive because of its apparent ability to incorporate all major factors affecting migration decision-making. However, although intuitively attractive, the push-pull model is deeply flawed as it misinterprets the very nature and meaning of human mobility while it is misleading in its core assumptions about the causes of migration processes. The main fallacies of the push-pull model are threefold. *First*, the push-pull model is unable to explain the complex hierarchical geographical patterning and social selectivity of real-world migration processes (de Haas, 2023). It is a purely descriptive, static model listing factors which are assumed to play ‘some’ role in migration in a relative arbitrary manner, without specifying their relative weight and mutual interactions, and without giving any insights in the *processes* driving migration. As Skeldon put it succinctly:

It is never entirely clear how the various factors combine together to cause population movement. We are left with a list of factors, all of which can clearly contribute to migration, but which lack a framework to bring them together in an explanatory system ... The push-pull theory is but a platitude at best (Skeldon, 1990: 125–6).

We should also question the labelling of particular factors as being invariably a ‘push’ or a ‘pull’. After all, the same conditions that make some people leave, make others stay, or attract people from other places. Push-pull models have therefore difficulties explaining why many countries and regions simultaneously experience substantial in-movement and out-movement, or why migrants would return. As Lee (1966) already observed, people have different subjective perceptions, preferences and ambitions, and therefore react in different ways to the same circumstances of ‘external stimuli’.

Second, because of its deterministic nature, the push-pull model leads to an erroneous portrayal of migration as being primarily ‘caused’ by factors such as economic inequalities, poverty, population growth or environmental pressures in origin societies. This naïvely portrays people as passive pawns that are pushed and pulled around the world by macro-forces – or, at best, in neo-classical applications of the push-pull model, as rather soulless individuals seeking to maximize their income or ‘utility’ – as if they have no real agency, and as if migration does not require significant resources.

This contradicts empirical evidence about the complex, fundamentally non-linear, and initially positive, relation between migration and larger processes of economic development and social transformation. Notwithstanding its intuitive appeal and widespread use, the push-pull model is unable to explain a whole range of empirical paradoxes. For instance, if poverty and destitution would be the root cause of migration, why do the poorest countries in the world tend to have the lowest long-distance emigration levels? And why does emigration initially tends to *increase* when low-income countries become richer and income gaps with destination countries actually *decrease*?

If ‘population pressure’ would drive migration, why do most migrants move from relatively sparsely populated areas to densely populated areas? And why then is emigration generally highest in countries where population growth is declining fast? If environmental degradation would really push people off the land, why does long-distance migration often decrease during droughts and floods? And if inequality would really be the driver of migration, why do many migrants move between countries with similar levels of development? (see de Haas, 2023).

And, perhaps the most important question of all: why do most people actually *not* migrate despite the presence of alleged ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors in the form of poverty, violence, environmental degradation and inequality? The most striking thing about migration is that at least 96% of the world population is living in their native country. Besides a degree of *involuntary immobility* (see Carling, 2002) among those who wish, but lack the abilities, to move, this exposes people’s strong preference to stay at home.

In this context, Schewel (2020) argued that migration research suffers from a *mobility bias*: By focusing on the causes of migration we tend to neglect the countervailing structural and personal forces that prompt so many people to stay, or to remain *voluntarily immobile*. This particularly applies to the push-pull model, as it assumes that people, when faced with economic, political, or environmental adversity, will simply leave, while, in reality people show huge resilience in exerting their wish to stay. Obviously, there is no room for all of this in the push-pull model.

These and various other empirical paradoxes cannot be fully explained in this short contribution, but what these all reveal is the *third* major fallacy of the push-pull model: its lack of any meaningful conceptualization of migratory agency. Simply put, in order to migrate people need to have both the aspirations and capabilities to do so. With regards to so-called ‘South-North’ migration, for instance, numerous empirical studies have shown that migration is not so much a stereotypical ‘desperate flight from misery’ but rather an *investment* in the long term-wellbeing of entire families, which requires significant resources. In fact, impoverishment and extreme adversity often *deprives* people of the means to move over long distances. This helps to explain that sub-Saharan Africa is the least migratory region in the world (see Flahaux & de Haas, 2016).

Paradoxically, migration tends to rise as low-income societies become richer, better educated and more connected, since such social transformations alongside structural shifts from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial economies typically tend to simultaneously increase people’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate within and across international borders. This is not only about economic and demographic transformations, but also about cultural change and education shaping people’s subjective life aspirations. As the Nigerian geographer Akin Mabogunje observed already back in 1970 in the African context, migration is not only a utilitarian means to an end – to get a job, earn more income or obtaining a degree – but is also linked to intrinsic, irreversible changes in ideas about the ‘good life’, typically imagined in urban environments (Mabogunje, 1970).

While development initially increases migration, extreme poverty can actually deprive people of the means to migrate. This is one of the main reasons why climate change is unlikely to trigger mass migration; another extremely popular inference of the push-pull model. In fact, the greatest victims of environmental (or economic, or political) havoc, are those trapped in situations of *involuntary immobility* (de Haas, 2023). Obviously, all of this is diametrically opposed to the assumptions and predictions of the push-pull model.

Towards a new migration paradigm

Because of its simplistic, deterministic and static nature, the push-pull model is unable to conceptualize migration as a continuous *social process* and is outright misleading in its central predictions. What is needed, therefore, is a new paradigm: a *holistic* perspective that conceptualizes migration as an *intrinsic* and inseparable part of broader

processes of development and social transformation. Such a scientific paradigm on migration compels us to analyse migration in a radically different way. These ideas are not new, although they have not received the attention they deserve. Mobility transition theory pioneered by Zelinsky (1971) and further elaborated by Skeldon (1990, 1997) posits that there are patterned regularities in the transformation of internal and international mobility patterns in modernizing societies, including a general increase and diversification of all forms of internal and international mobility.

Together with my colleagues, starting at Oxford University's International Migration Institute (IMI), I have built on those ideas by analysing the social mechanisms explaining significant variations in mobility transitions within and across societies, using a broad social transformation perspective (see de Haas, 2010; IMI, 2006; Schewel, de Haas & Vezzoli, 2025). Over the past decades, increasingly valuable fieldwork-based research has enhanced our understanding of the motivations, experiences and strategies of migrants on-the-move, highlighting how they deploy their agency to navigate constraints such as border restrictions, exploitation and abuse (e.g., Berriane et al., 2013; Brachet, 2018; Olayo-Méndez, 2025; Parreñas, 2015; Sanchez & Zhang, 2020). However, a theoretical perspective linking the macro-level associations between migration and social transformation on a micro-behavioural level has long been missing, to provide a more meaningful understanding of both agency and structure in migration processes.

In an earlier contribution to this journal (de Haas, 2021), *A Theory of Migration*, I tried to fill that gap. First, I argued that we need to define human mobility as people's capability to choose where to live, *including the option to stay*, rather than as the act of moving or migrating itself. This yields a vision in which moving and staying are seen as complementary manifestations of migratory agency, enabling us to integrate the analysis of almost all forms of – voluntary and involuntary – mobility and immobility within one meta-conceptual framework. From there, I argued that migration (the actual act of moving) should be conceptualized as a function of people's (1) aspirations and (2) capabilities to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures. The resulting framework helps to understand the complex and often counter-intuitive ways in which processes of social transformation shape migration patterns.

At its core, the idea is not that complicated: rather than viewing migration as the antithesis of development, we should see it as a *constituent part* of development and global change. Or, as Skeldon succinctly summarized his argument: 'Migration *is* development' (Skeldon, 1997, p. 205). Perhaps the best example to illustrate this basic insight are the intrinsic interlinkages between urbanization and rural-to-urban migration: it is impossible to understand urbanization processes without taking into consideration rural-to-urban migration, just as it is impossible to understand the modern migration experience without taking into account urbanization processes that inevitably lead to an increasing concentration of economic activities and populations in cities.

However, truly adopting this view has revolutionary consequences. Embracing a view of migration as development, and understanding its central role in broader social transformation processes, leads us to a totally new understanding of human mobility – a new paradigm on the very nature and causes of migration that belies almost everything most people believe about the subject. However, it has proven to be very difficult to break the hegemony of the push-pull model. Given the extent to which the ideas and language

of push-pull have penetrated deeply into our subconsciousness, this will not be an easy task.

Although challenging, it is nonetheless essential to rid – and liberate – ourselves from the old ways of thinking, as our understanding of migration cannot progress as long as it remains mired into what essentially is a pseudo-theory: the push-pull model is not only just simplistic, but *fundamentally misleading* in its core assumptions about the very nature and causes of migration processes. We need nothing less than a paradigm shift, an entirely different way of thinking and talking about migration.

Practically, this implies that far more research should be done on how migration processes are embedded in broader social transformation processes. To counter the Western receiving country bias, it is certainly essential to conduct – and publish! – much more research on migration from the perspective of non-Western societies. Yet it is equally important not to essentialize these as ‘sending’ regions in the ‘Global South’, as this would amount to falling into the same essentializing trap that would reproduce the exact same crude South-North dichotomies inherent to the push-pull model. In fact, we need to dissolve the entire distinction between ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries. The goal should be to improve our understanding of the diverse ways in which social transformation simultaneously shapes complex forms of human mobility, within and across border, and towards and from societies.

Adopting this new perspective on migration is also essential to liberate ourselves from the paralysing straitjacket of the South-North dichotomy as a particularly essentializing and harmful manifestation of the push-pull model. The push-pull model feeds into dichotomous, stereotypical and colonial worldviews, portraying countries in the ‘Global South’ as pools of poverty, violence and misery that massively uproot people, leaving them no choice to embark upon desperate journeys towards the ‘Global North’. This not only hugely exaggerates the actual magnitude of ‘South-North’ migration, but unilaterally frames migrants from low and middle-income countries as victims or forced migrants. It leaves little room for agency, and ignores that many non-Western countries are important destination countries in their own right.

All of this illustrates that ridding ourselves of the ‘push-pull’ model is imperative if we are to overcome the severe biases that have hampered migration studies so far, and if we are to establish a truly *global* migration paradigm.

Published online: 08 October 2025

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