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## International Migration, Development, and Policy: Reconsidering Migration Transition Theory—A Way Forward

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## International Migration, Development, and Policy: Reconsidering Migration Transition Theory—A Way Forward

### Cover Page Footnote

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association (Montreal, 2017) and the International Studies Association (San Francisco, 2018).

# International Migration, Development, and Policy: Reconsidering Migration Transition Theory—A Way Forward

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*Migration transition theories have been contested as they informed immigration policy in the Global North, which—based on assumptions that immigrants from developing countries may be a threat to social stability and economic opportunity—aimed to diminish emigration from the South. Development policies were proposed that could produce a “migration transition” in the South, where it was assumed that improved economic development would act as a substitute for migration and lead to minimal emigration, thus reducing overall immigration to the Global North. However, policies did not result in a migration transition. Acknowledging problematic rhetoric and contradictory policy and outcomes, this paper addresses key deficiencies of migration transition models. By reconsidering how migration transition frameworks could be modified to inform immigration policy, we may pursue theoretical and methodological paths for future empirical inquiries on development and international migration.*

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## Introduction

In recent years, policymakers in affluent countries in the Global North have moved to make immigration policies and vetting procedures more restrictive. They have alluded that migrants and refugees from the South could threaten the disintegration of social stability (Bonvin 1996; *France24* 2015). Preoccupation with national security by developed nations’ politicians and the civil sphere and their concerns about incoming migrants from developing countries is not novel (Castles, De Haas, & Miller 2014). Some current immigration policy in the Global North bears vestiges of updates from the 1990s. These revisions were put into place following a debate beginning in the 1960s and 1970s that evaluated how development could

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reduce immigration from the South. Economists monopolized the debate and introduced resolutions to curb migration via development policies based on economic equilibrium models. It was projected that increased development would lead to a short-term 'migration hump' in developed countries and a 'migration transition' in developing countries (Martin & Taylor 1996). Given this historically problematic approach to policy, migration transition theory should not be wholly abandoned but be revisited. I argue that migration transition frameworks can inform appropriate long-term policies. Strategies that reflect international migration and development trends must apply to the interest and safety of nations, international organizations, and individual migrants.

Migration transition theories emerged in the 1960s and 70s as part of a debate about development and the consequences of globalization and whether migration caused development or whether development induced migration. Frank (1969, 1979) and Papademetriou (1985) contended that emigration from the Global South led to further underdevelopment in those areas. Others concluded that international migration would spur modernization and productivity, benefiting both sending and receiving countries (Alder 1981; Pennix 1982). What remained from the debate at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that some policy in the North was informed by the false perception that immigrants from the South were poor, uneducated, unskilled youth from “backward rural areas” who came to capital-rich countries to improve their relative wellbeing by occupying low-income jobs, and absorption of these immigrants into the labor force would lead to increased levels of national unemployment (Piore 1979, 3; Bonvin 1996, 7; Collier 2013, 84). As a result, the view that immigration from less developed countries should diminish to protect national social and economic wellbeing in the North was legitimated.

Economic equilibrium models predicted that developing the Global South would act as a direct substitute for migration (Taylor 1996, 11). In the 1990s, supranational organizations implemented neoliberal development policies, including restructuring plans, international trade, foreign aid, foreign direct investment (FDI), and debt relief, to ameliorate conditions in developing nations. One such policy that depicts this period is NAFTA (the 1994 *North American Free Trade Agreement*), which aimed to increase trade exchange among the US, Canada, and Mexico and assumed job creation would reduce immigration. Yet cross-border mobility increased. As the NAFTA example suggests, despite the implementation of economic development policies and the adoption of selectively restrictive immigration policies by the North, migration between developing to developed countries continues. Recent research shows international migration and development are complementary, not causal. While migration can affect real

structural political and economic change in sending and receiving societies, the effects are limited (De Haas 2009).

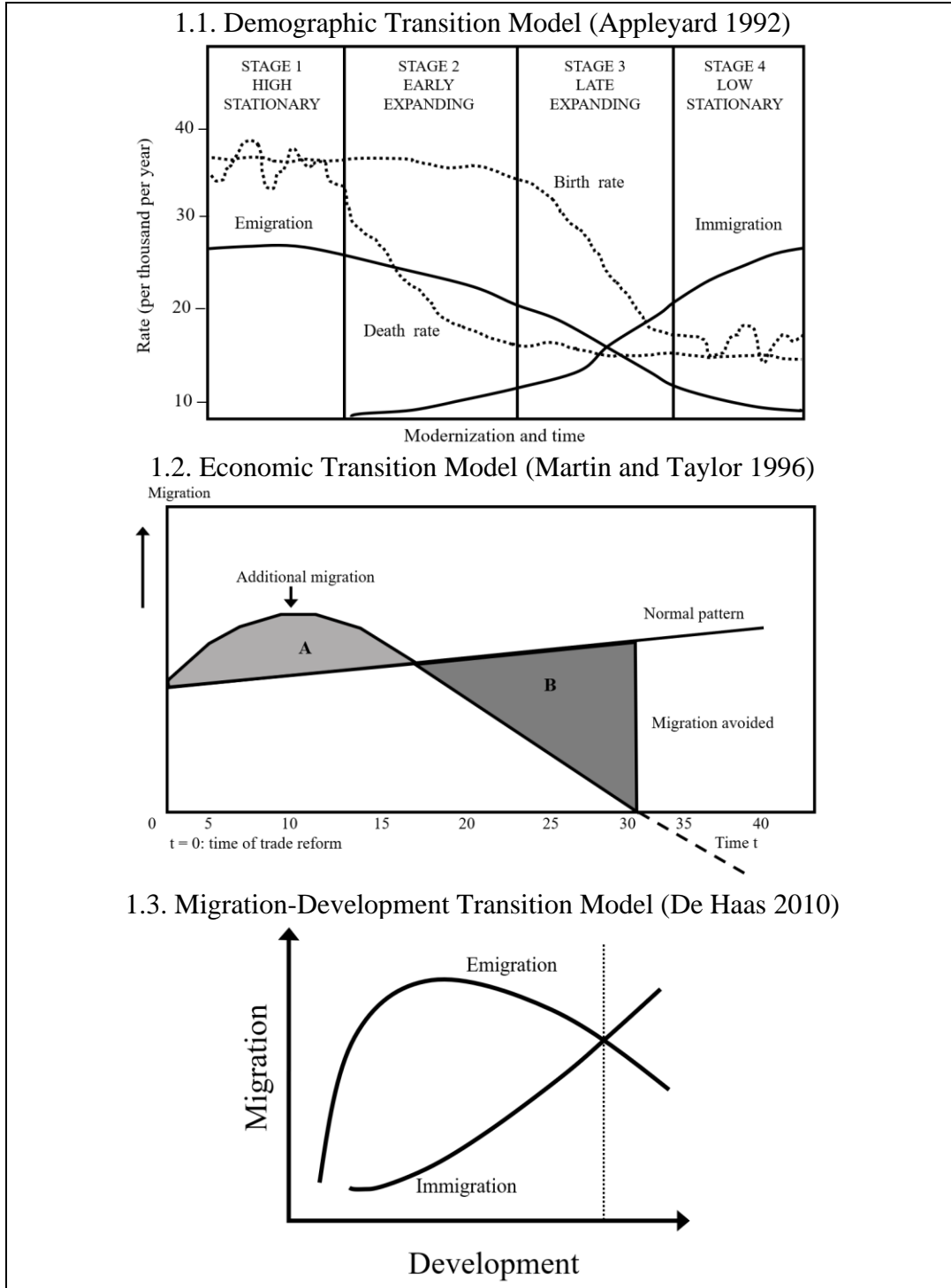
## Migration Transition Theories

Problematic immigration policy objectives based on economic equilibrium models that were proposed as ‘a solution to resolving the problem’ of immigration from the South prompted me to reassess migration transition theory. Migration transition theory posits that through development countries experience a transition over time from predominantly migrant-sending to migrant-receiving, and emigration eventually falls close to zero. There are two primary approaches to migration theory, demographic and economic, which, respectively, explain migrational changes as related to national population and fiscal increases.

Demographic migration transition theory is illustrated through Zelinsky’s (1971) hypothesis that population change occurs through vital and mobility transitions over space and time. Zelinsky applied principles of spatial diffusion to the classic demographic population equation, *population change = natural increase + net migration*, where net population change is the sum of natural increase (births less deaths) and net migration (immigration less emigration). Zelinsky devised five stages of curvilinear spatiotemporal mobility transitions. These are concisely summarized by Appleyard’s (1992) four-stage transition model (Figure 1.1 below). Zelinsky concluded that mobility transitions were linked to progressive, irreversible demographic social changes brought about through modernization. Notably, Zelinsky (1971, 48) raised a crucial question regarding demographic and migration transitions concerning the population carry capacity theorem and development, asking: “When and how will mobility saturation be reached?”

The second type of migration transition model is based on the concept of economic equilibrium, which is the foundation of neoclassical economic migration theories (Sjaasad 1962; Todaro 1969). In contrast to curvilinear demographic models, it assumes a linear relationship where economic revenue is inversely proportional to migration rates, which are expected to reach equilibrium. At the threshold point, economic conditions (e.g., relative cross-national wage differentials) would become equal, resulting in zero net migration. Martin and Taylor (1996) employed this type of theory in their model of a ‘migration hump’ (Figure 1.2), which was used to inform development policies meant to diminish

**Figure 1. Migration Transition Models**



unwanted immigration to the Global North. Their model was based on the assumption that with the increased economic development of the Global South through international trade, gross national income (GNI) levels would gradually rise. This would lead to a short-term migration bump (due to more people being able to migrate from the South to the North as a result of their increased wages), followed by a decline in migration to zero when national incomes were relatively equivalent (a 'migration trough'). Martin and Taylor acknowledged that if trade and migration were substitutes, a migration trough would result. In contrast, if they were complements, a migration hump would stabilize as a 'migration plateau.'

Skeldon (1997) critiqued Zelinsky's theory. He found it described a unilinear, deterministic, and universal system based on a generalized historical sequence of industrialization, demographic changes, and migration trends in present-day developed countries (mostly Western Europe). Skeldon pointed out that processes of social and economic development and concomitant mobility change, as experienced in Europe, may not equally apply to contemporary developing countries. There is no unique pattern of mobility change. More recently, De Haas (2010) reviewed demographic and economic migration transition models. Like Skeldon, he concluded that despite weaknesses and omissions in classic models that by amending hypotheses to fit available data, transition theories could yield valuable insights into structured regularities in international migration patterns. These frameworks incorporate social structure and agency, as well as account for stagnation in and reversibility of immigration flows. Thus, they explain how development processes are systematically, causally linked to mobility.

De Haas (2010) hypothesized that human and economic development generally leads to higher levels of migration through increasing personal capabilities, aspirations, and occupational specialization, where international development is associated with a nonlinear sequence of migration transitions. In the modified version of migration-development transition theory (Figure 1.3), the model assumes that as development increases, migrants will pursue better opportunities, such that out-migration would grow more quickly than in-migration. Emigration would overtake immigration (a 'migration hump'). A hump is produced when emigration hits a critical threshold at some degree of development, followed by a gradual drop. Immigration would continue to steadily grow, leading to emigration and immigration attaining a point of equilibrium at high levels of development. Once developmental progress has advanced past equilibrium, migration patterns would reach a period of higher in-migration, where out-migration would taper off in an inverse-U shape.

As a whole, demographic-mobility transition models are based on a theory that population increases resulting from modernization processes drive movement, and economic transition models are based on a theory that the less fortunate move toward locales of higher wages. While these frameworks are quite different theoretically, they are superficially analogous. All approaches use measures of development (e.g., societal modernization, economic development, or trade) as the variable explaining changes to migration. A visual comparison of Figure 1.1 Stage 3 and Figures 1.2 and 1.3 suggests that development should lead to migration transition(s), which end with high immigration and little to no emigration.

### **Limitations of Migration Transition Theories**

Although transition models by Zelinsky and Martin and Taylor are theoretically sound, they have flaws to the extent that they are inapplicable to long-term international migration trends. De Haas' model is more relevant since it incorporates amendments from these models and employs substantive migrational data, acting as a sliding ruler describing potential migration-development combinations, but it lacks theoretical predictive and explanatory power due to data limitations outside the researcher's control. The transition models have three main shortcomings: (1) they misrepresent global mobility equality; (2) they inaccurately account for the role that the state plays in shaping international migration patterns; and (3) there is little evidence that international migration from the South to the North has diminished since the 1990s.

The first issue with traditional transition models is that they misrepresent global mobility equality. Demographic transition models assume that countries would have 'progressed to full development' once they possess traits exhibited by affluent nations—variable fertility, stable mortality, low emigration, and high immigration. In contrast to classic demographic models that transition from emigration- to immigration-predominant, migration transitions based on economic equilibrium theory expect low emigration and low immigration in both the North and South. The expectation of an ideal configuration generates spuriousness in terms of mobility equality for migrants coming from countries with disadvantaged migrational positions (i.e., migration is restricted by a receiving country, or within-country disadvantages deny mobility freedoms). We can conceptualize mobility inequality as the disparate freedom of cross-border movement, noting that mobility inequality is complex and multifaceted, encompassing structure and agency. For brevity in this example we will consider mobility inequalities based on the right to move granted by state policy via national origin.



There are two sides to this debate. First, models suggest that at a future time all countries worldwide would reach relative economic and human development equality, resulting in low emigration due to the lack of incentive to migrate to a superior location and high immigration because of attractive national political economies. If relative wellbeing via development implies emigration reduction, from where are immigrants coming? Zelinsky (1971, 231) and Appleyard (1992, 21) concluded that immigration acceleration would be represented by circular movement among relatively equal states, thus redistributing the global population. Second, classic models can also be interpreted as applicable by development level where immigration is likely to occur between similar countries, i.e., North-North or South-South migration, but not South-North migration. This approach imposes a rigid modernization regime that invalidates processes of development outside distinct expectations and measurements, thereby reinforcing development disparities, subjugating non-conformant countries, and sustaining existing mobility inequalities for migrants originating from less-privileged nations.

In addition, classic transition theories inadequately account for the role immigration policy and the state play in shaping international migration patterns. Using an example, we could conduct a counterfactual thought experiment, asking: would migration trends continue if all political and economic ties were removed, assuming no ecological or human-made crises? The answer is, likely not. At the national level, international migration systems theory asserts that migration systems are constructed via political, economic, social, and demographic contexts, incorporate feedback and adjustments, and other historical, cultural, colonial, and technological linkages, resulting in a general core group of receiving and sending countries (Kritz & Zlotnik 1992). At the individual-level, migration aspirations and capabilities theory asserts that within constraints of immigration policy, international migration will continue indefinitely due to the perpetual demand for family reunification and skilled and unskilled labor (Carling 2002; De Haas 2007). We may thus expect family reunification, return, and circular migration to continue; cultural interest or business necessity may draw a person and their network to a particular country; environmental crises or war and political repression may generate migration flows. Even in the absence of political-economic relations, transnational networks maintain cross-national ties.

What then is the role of international immigration policy in influencing migration transitions? On the one hand, scholars argue economic openness undermines state control of immigration and naturalization policies (Sassen 1996; Hollifield 1998; FitzGerald, Cook-Martín, García, & Arar 2017). On the other hand, the state's capacity to control immigration has increased, and liberal states accept more immigrants because of domestic pressures rather than external ones

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(Freeman 1998; Joppke 1998). Yet, no matter the stance, immigration policy is designed to keep the ‘wrong type’ of immigrants out (Castles, De Haas, & Miller 2014). In the Global North immigration policies were originally created as protectionist political mechanisms against foreigners, but have morphed into socioeconomic mechanisms—used either as a means of inclusion to encourage economic growth by increasing the number of foreign workers to fill labor market demands or as a means of exclusion to protect the population from unemployment in an economic downturn by barring immigration. Despite dialogue that international migration is leading to the disintegration of state boundaries and political control, nations remain involved in decisions regarding state sovereignty, immigration policy, and border control. National immigration policy continues to shape international migration trends.

Lastly, traditional transition theories are flawed because there is little evidence that emigration from the South to the North has diminished since the 1990s. We recall Zelinsky speculated that with modernity, the world would reach ‘mobility saturation,’ a Malthusian-esque concept akin to population carrying capacity theorem, which predicts that the world can sustain international migration only to a certain degree. Similarly, Martin and Taylor predicted a ‘migration trough’ when economic development substituted migration. These are erroneous on two counts. First, Appleyard (1992, 18) reminds us that net migration only affects population redistribution and not global population growth. Second, if the concepts of ‘mobility saturation’ and ‘mobility trough’ were legitimate, the world would have already achieved ‘saturation’ with no indication of reduced migration. These notions falsely assume that people migrate primarily for economic betterment, ruling out structural or individual drivers. Skeldon (1997) and De Haas (2007) argue that international mobility will continue because migration and development are interdependent integral parts of society.

Since the implementation of development policies in the 1960s and 70s, and again in the 1990s, United Nations’ data show that since 1960, international migration remains at about 3% of the world’s population (UN 2002). It is forecast to remain stable through 2050 (UNDESA 2013a). As of 2013, of the 136 million migrants who lived in the North (Europe, North America, or Oceania), 54 million (40%) came from other countries in the North, and 82 million (60%) came from the South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America/ Caribbean). Likewise, of the 96 million migrants residing in developing nations, 14 million (14%) came from the North, and 82 million (86%) originated from the South (UNDESA 2013b). Although more migrants live in the North, there are about the same number of migrants from the South in developing and developed countries (North: 81.8 million, South: 82.3 million).

At the global level, although more migrants live in the North, international migration principally originates from the South. Of the migrants who come from the South, they tend to move regionally, meaning much of international migration from the South remains in the South. Most regional international migration occurs within five migration corridors: Asia to Asia, Europe to Europe, Latin America/Caribbean to North America, Africa to Africa, and Asia to Europe (UNDESA 2013b; Abel & Sander 2014). Bi-national migration corridors with the largest number of international migrants per year are from Mexico to the United States (South-North path), Sudan to South Sudan, Palestine to Jordan, Myanmar to Thailand (South-South paths), and India to the UAE (South-North path) (UNDESA 2013b). Among North-North and South-North pathways, the US is the most popular destination. Among South-South and North-South pathways, Russia is both the leading destination and origin of migration (Anich, Brian, & Laczko 2013).

Across the spectrum of countries and their development levels, a transition from emigration- to immigration-predominant can be observed. From here, two questions must be addressed: has increased cross-national economic development over time led countries to transition from less to more developed? If countries experienced economic transition, have individual countries experienced migration transition? Mahutga and Smith (2011) examine economic growth from 1965 to 2000 and find Spain, China, Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea transitioned to higher positions in the international division of labor. They conclude that countries of intermediate economic development levels experienced the most growth, and state-sponsored development explains long-term economic upward mobility, not reliance on foreign assistance. However, not all countries that experienced economic advancement transitioned to sending countries. De Haas (2010) notes Spain, Italy, Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Korea transitioned from net emigration into net immigration countries. In the case of Italy and Spain, Cook-Martín (2008) demonstrates how structural changes brought about through economic and political development policies appear to have reversed the flow of migrants from Spain and Italy to Argentina.

### **A Way Forward: Next Steps**

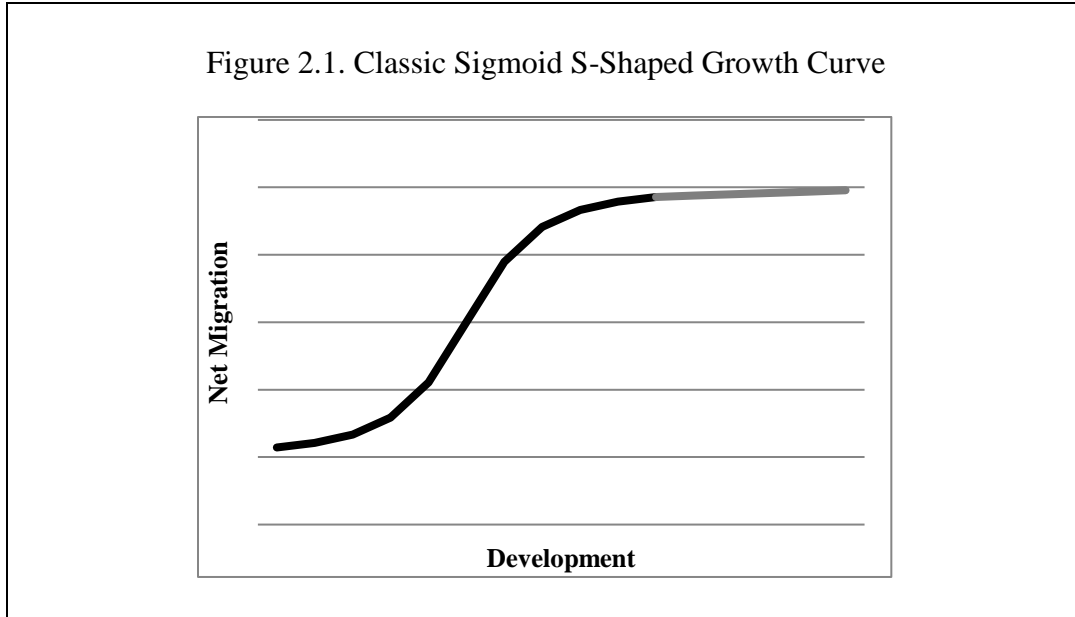
As to whether migration transition theory should be wholly abandoned or revisited, we should indeed abandon counterproductive rhetoric, intentions, and policy based on prior models that subordinate countries in and people from the Global South. However, migration transition theory can be revisited to better contextualize the development-migration relationship. Moving forward, we can recognize that a transition threshold exists and explore *what* and *how* changes

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effectuate. For example, when applied to a development-migration continuum, we may observe how nations catalyze their own transition—with or without the added assistance of the international community. I suggest we advance future inquires in four different ways: (1) consider an S-curve theoretical framework for long-term international migration trends; (2) engage national, regional, and cross-national case studies; (3) employ advanced methods and comprehensive data; and (4) become involved in policymaking.

Firstly, in comparison to classic demographic and economic transition models that theorized societal transformation (not transition) as stylized through an inverted U-curve, an S-shaped growth model as a heuristic device is more suitable because it shows that as development increases migration stabilizes. A sigmoid S-curve conceptual model follows the equation  $S = x/\sqrt{1 + x^2}$ . Net migration would initially be modest at lower levels of development. As development increases, both emigration and immigration would increase (although one may be predominant over the other). At a threshold point, net migration would flatten. Along the standard sigmoidal curve, net migration would continue horizontally with higher development. Yet, it is possible countries may advance or regress along the curve, or that unforeseen factors may lead to a gradual increase or decrease in net migration after the initial stage of stabilization (Figure 2.1). The S-shape also smooths short-term fluctuations, absorbs gradual inclines or declines in net migration over time, and the curve would not drop sharply due to higher development. This model advances De Haas' cross-sectional transition model because it allows flexibility along a long-term continuum of migration-development characteristics. It incorporates mobility inequality across countries, national and international systems' immigration policy influences, and long-term international migrational patterns. The model corresponds with dynamic, reversible migration trends. Countries at higher levels of development would have stable net migration (e.g., low emigration, stable immigration), and developing countries would not experience a reversal of emigration at a certain development inflection point, rather emigration and immigration would stabilize over time.

## Figure 2. S-Curve Growth Model



The S-curve model is further supported by theoretical and empirical findings. In his study, De Haas finds curvilinear relationships between GDP per capita and HDI to net migration, however, in his composite model of GDP and HDI associations to total migration, the trends are S-shaped. Also, Martin and Taylor (1996) predicted that if migration and development were complements instead of substitutes, migration would plateau. From 1990 to 2000, migration stabilized in both the Global North and Global South, and it is estimated that after a slight peak experienced in the North from 2000 to 2010, worldwide migration will continue to stabilize through 2050 (UNDESA 2013a, 2013b).

Next, applying the S-curve heuristic, we may pursue national or regional case studies to examine countries over time and possible predictive characteristics. There are three possible routes: already transitioned countries; countries that did not experience a transition; and potential transitional countries. Cook-Martín (2008) examined specific national case studies of migration transition for Italy and Spain, and Mahutga and Smith (2011) explored reasons that may explain structural economic mobility for countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Korea, but further research could be done on Ireland, Malaysia, and other ‘Asian Miracle’ countries that experienced profound change. Studying transitioned countries could elucidate what factors are consequential, as well as examining countries in which transition did *not* occur. For instance, twenty-five years ago, Martin (1992, 1001) described

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how Poland was of prime interest to migration scholars because it seemed to experience an emigration transition in the 1980s to an immigration country in the 1990s. Poland has been a country of emigration since the 1960s and remains one of the top five sending countries (Anich, Brian, & Laczko 2013); what explains non-transitions? In the same vein, it is also worthwhile to evaluate other post-Soviet countries in the region and other potential transition countries. Russia is the leading sending and receiving country for South-South corridors, and a top destination for North-South migration (Anich, Brian, & Laczko 2013). Russia may be an appropriate contemporary case study to examine a unique political and economic climate that could lead to stabilized internal, intra-regional, and international migration.

For other countries that may experience migration transitions in conjunction with higher development, we could follow Skeldon's (1997, 15) five-tier model to focus on international migration to the 'Expanding Core,' e.g., Brazil, China, and India, and the 'Labour Frontier,' Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, and Turkey, respectively. Immigration and development policies in and toward developing countries are important to assess since much intra-regional and international migration originate from comparable countries and because they have economic stability and state formation necessary for integrated cross-national mobility. In studying these cases within a global lens we may expect international migration may remain at ~3% of the world's population, emigration from mid-level developing countries could stabilize—following an S-curve, and emigration within least developed countries will continue since they comprise the largest proportion of current international movement (Abel and Sander 2014).

In terms of examining migration transitions through advanced methods and comprehensive data, De Haas (2010) and Sanderson (2009) provide sound methodological suggestions to analyze migration, development, and transitions across countries. De Haas (2010) provides a cross-sectional method to examine numerous countries across development levels, acknowledging that longitudinal data would be better, but limitations in high-quality cross-national longitudinal data are restrictive. Likewise, Sanderson (2009) provides well-justified suggestions to use cross-national panel data and recommends employing dynamic econometric analysis, such as OLS-dynamic models (OLSD), random-effects models (REM), or fixed-effects models (FEM). Longitudinal, cross-national data provide an advantage over cross-sectional data by avoiding potential unit-specific spuriousness and by introducing the measure of time. There are limitations to public source data availability before 1990. Where data are available, annual data points may be irregularly reported. These problems are compounded by data availability

for developing nations. With the advancement of data collection and availability, longitudinal data are ideal, although pooled data could be used.

Based on research needs, both methods are applicable, however, scholars should proceed with discretion. Econometric models are popular among scholars whose primary interest is to examine the effect of economic development on international migration, using variables such as income inequality, international trade penetration, foreign direct investment, and the proliferation of banking and transnational corporations (Firebaugh 1999; Sanderson & Kentor 2009; Sanderson 2013a, 2013b). While these studies help us understand between- and within-country economic disparities, research that includes human or social development measures is sparse. One exception is Sanderson's (2010) assessment of the association and impact of cumulative international migration flows and human development index (HDI) indicators. However, he inadequately explains confounding effects on female labor force participation and female school enrollment due to insufficient inclusion of social and human development measures, especially those pertaining to the Global South, in the statistical models. As reference, Easterlin (2000) suggests that while people in developing regions may overtly express their need for economic amelioration, part of social development must include factors of wellbeing and political participation in addition to adequate, decent work. Utilizing sophisticated analysis models fitted to panel data that include economic *and* human social development measures may provide a more complete illustration of the relationship between international migration and development.

The last suggestion—getting involved in policymaking—is not straightforward and eludes social scientists' grasp to effectively enter a perennial conversation with policymakers to affect real positive changes. Among international migration scholars, policy-making engagement is a common discussion topic at national and international conferences. Yet, there seems no certain path on how to gain entrée and maintain presence. A reoccurring proposition is to have long-term research inform far-sighted immigration policy that would move past short-term reactionary election cycle politics and policymaking in efforts to benefit immigrants and a receiving economy. One avenue is for interdisciplinary scholars to join forces with international organizations to share information, collect empirical data, and build theory. For instance, to balance mutual interests, migration experts could advise policymakers on contemporary global migration trends as a way to create mobility corridors based on equal mobility opportunities. Moving forward, there is room to improve the capacity to be heard and involved in international migration and development issues.

In conclusion, migration transition frameworks can inform appropriate long-term policy that reflects international migration and development trends. With

international migration estimates remaining stable through 2050, sustainable immigration policy should be far-sighted and mutually beneficial to the interests of sending and receiving nations, international organizations, and individual migrants. Policies should establish ethical protocol and vetting procedures, and aim to create safer passage for migrants, reduce clandestine and irregular migration, and recognize the human worth of migrants by providing them with programs and tools they may need to promote their wellbeing and success. This is salient given serious limitations in policy that adequately address political refugees and account for ecological refugees. For example, with increasing climate change, sustainable immigration policies in both the Global North and South should include mechanisms, programs, and personnel with which to respond to long-term *en masse* migration shifts. With immigration policy in place like this, instead of reacting extemporaneously, leaders may readily accommodate all types of migrants to reduce trauma. As social scientists, we can evaluate current regional and international migration trends against policy goals, and with more presence in the on-going dialogue, we can better inform sustainable international immigration policy for both the Global North and South.

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