

Finn Tarp
Speaking Notes

Root causes and large scale forced migration

What do we know about root causes? Can we do something differently?

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1. Introduction

- Few issues have been so contentious in recent years as international migration. For good reasons and for bad. It is also obvious that policies governing migration are in a tangle. There is no international regime that establishes standards and principles for national migration policies, other than in the case of refugees.
- Lots of issues are often bundled together in the public debate – and it can be difficult to disentangle the various elements in the mix. This is not helpful from a policy perspective.
- My short presentation today will focus on the economic side of migration. But obviously there are other dimensions that may be more important in the minds of policymakers and the public.
- Migration is likely to increase in the coming years. Demographic trends in Europe and sub-Saharan Africa diverge to such an extent that the push and pull of migration will intensify as the population of Europe gets older and that of Africa younger.

2. A few background facts

- The majority of international migrants are not forcibly displaced. And out of the 65.3 million, forcibly displaced people worldwide, most – that is – 40.8 million – are displaced internally.
- In 2015, approximately 9 per cent or 21.3 million of all migrants were international refugees; and this number is only slightly higher today than in 1990.
- Most migrants originate from middle-income countries and reside in high-income countries. Relatively fewer migrants originate from high-income countries, and the number of migrants from low-income countries is rather small (25 million, or 10 per cent).

- 54 per cent of international refugees are from Syria, Afghanistan or Somalia; and the main contributing factor to the increase of refugees between 2010 and 2015 was the Syrian war. Excluding Syria, the increase from the end of 2011 to mid-2015 would have been only half a million refugees.
- Even though most international migrants reside in the developed world, most refugees (nearly 90 per cent) are hosted by middle income countries.

3. Root causes of migration and its economic impact

- When the term migration is invoked economists will typically think in terms of **push** and **pull** factors. Refer to the Harris-Todaro model of rural-urban migration. Terminology is however fuzzy when root causes are referred to. At a minimum there is need to distinguish between forced versus voluntary (or economic) migration, and between internal versus external migration.
- Usually economists view migration as largely positive for the economy and for the individual: the movement of people into higher-productivity sectors (which pay more). But the distributional effects are complicated. Migration can cause winners and losers; and the public judgement is mixed.
- An element in this is what economists refer to as the 'lump of labour' fallacy (that there is a fixed number of jobs to share around). So low-skilled nationals may perceive migrants as taking 'their' jobs; but the evidence shows that this effect is actually quite weak (migrants add to the purchasing power in the economy which creates more work including for low skilled nationals in aggregate).
- When focus is on forced migration, a useful approach in identifying root causes is to distinguish between:
 - **structural** causes of displacement, which comprise a broad range of negative political, economic and social developments; and
 - **acute** causes of displacement which can be armed conflicts, civil wars and other forms of generalized violence.
 - Both of these sets of factors have a role to play in relation to forced migration.

4. Responses

- There are no perfect and easy answers to the migrant issue; responses must vary depending on which specific dimension one has in mind. When the causes are structural, long term development

is called for. In acute crises other initiatives – often of a more political and military nature – are needed. Easier said than done; I hasten to add.

- It can also be highlighted that responses to root causes of forced migration must differ for different groups or 'types' of people – even in conflict situations. Take disadvantaged minorities versus dominant groups, young working age people versus older folk or children. Policy recommendations have to vary based on addressing issues most relevant to the groups most likely to migrate.
- Another observation is that support for countries that neighbour conflict zones and those that in fact host most refugees is a relevant measure. There are humanitarian reasons for this, and more refugees may in this case stay in their home regions from where they can more easily return back home after conflicts, rather than migrate on to Europe.
- In formulating responses three concerns come to mind.
 - First, it is problematic if development funds are not primarily used in compliance with their actual purpose (to achieve sustainable improvement of the living conditions in recipient countries) – but are used to try and prevent undesired migration to donor states. It is very unlikely that aid will achieve the goal (i.e. payments to governments to try and stop their nationals moving, as such controls are often easily circumvented). Better to focus aid on achieving growth (and therefore higher living standard at home) and help war-to-peace transition.
 - Second, a focus on addressing root causes of displacement may raise unrealistic expectations about what development cooperation can actually achieve in situations of mass displacement (funds will be just too small to have major impact).
 - Third, a debate that focuses solely on tackling the root causes of displacement – important as that is – may distract attention from the need to reform European/global asylum policy and to achieve greater responsibility sharing at European level.

5. Final remarks

- A general answer to the question of what to do different is not so obvious. It is worth keeping in mind though that a one size fits all response to development work is – in general – unlikely to be successful. And this is so in particular for development in fragile states and conflict situations. This point has been emphasized repeatedly in WIDER research – such as the ReCom Governance and Fragility position paper and the PDIA project.
- The present crisis has however exposed the lack of international global norms and standards regarding burden sharing and the access of migrants to social services, work permits, family unification etc. It seems to me that this is one important area where more could be done.

- A focus on root causes to the exclusion of other policy responses is problematic. The call to tackle the root causes of displacement is helpful insofar as it contributes to the provision of more financial resources for development-oriented projects in countries of origin or host countries. But there is the risk that successful structural programmes, aiming at long-term effects, are replaced by short-term projects to prevent acute refugee movements.
- And in the case of violent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan or the African Great Lakes region, development cooperation can only make a partial contribution to tackling the root causes of displacement. Here, involvement of other policy areas, such as foreign policy, security policy, trade policy and economic policy, is primarily called for. Only if these policy areas get productively involved can the factors driving displacement and the war economies be overcome.
- Migration – voluntary and forced – is one of the big issues of our time, and calm sensible research and policy debate to guide realistic action is essential