



**'Migration in a Changing World: Where Do We Go Now?'**  
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COMMENTARY

by

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This is a commentary on the following article:

["Revisiting the Migration–Development Nexus: From Social Networks and Remittances to Markets for Migration Control"](#)

Ninna Nyberg Sørensen

It is now ten years since the phrase migration-development nexus was launched upon the world in a special issue of *International Migration* edited by Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, Nicholas Van Hear and Poul Engberg-Pedersen. A decade on, Sørensen revisits the theme in an article for another special issue of the same journal: *Migration and development buzz? Rethinking the migration development nexus and policies* (Brønden 2012). Her re-examination of the migration-development nexus is augmented by the introduction of the migration-security nexus and the examination of the relationship between the two.

Looking back at the original articles of 2002, it is striking that the term nexus is left undefined. Sørensen corrects this here, drawing on work on the 'security-development nexus' (Stern and Öjendal 2010). Here, a nexus is taken to be a productive pairing of arenas of public policy both for the analysis of complex social processes to generate knowledge, and also in an attempt to develop more integrated and effective policy to shape these processes. In addition to this use of a nexus for analysis and policy formation, it is also deployed discursively, reflexively creating a new set of 'real' connections that become established as part of the taken-for-granted backdrop of public policy debates. As Sørensen notes, this serves the interests of particular actors, setting the stage for future policy deliberations. This discussion of the definition of a nexus is very helpful. I return to it at the end of these comments after I have looked at how it is used in Sørensen's argument.

These different aspects of nexus thinking can be seen very clearly when it comes to the migration and development nexus – which Sørensen helped to launch. Here the concept of the nexus started with scholarly discussions, stimulated to a large extent by the transnational turn in migration studies that drew attention to the significance of people's ongoing mobility and their identities and practices that spanned nations. What emerged was a very vigorous debate about the inter-relationship between migration and development, which suggested that migration could be beneficial for development. In particular, attention was focused on the scale and use of both financial and social remittances and the potential role of the diaspora to support (or hinder) development. This has been picked up by a wide array of states and international organisations and the migration-development nexus appears to have a well-established role in public policy debates – not least through the institution of the Global Forum on Migration and Development which will hold its sixth meeting at the end of this month (November 2012).

I leave aside the question of what these initiatives achieve. However, the fact of their existence and the constant refrain about the links between migration and development have helped to create an orthodox set of questions and debates that frame the discussions. In other words, there is a discourse of the migration-development nexus that sets the tone of the debate and limits the range of possible responses. As Sørensen shows, the focus on remittances, diaspora engagement and return migration clearly reflects the

interests of states, while questions about the intrinsic value of mobility as part of human development is largely forgotten.

Sørensen traces out a similar process for the migration-security nexus. Perhaps the key difference here, in terms of the evolution of the nexus, is that it has not been so openly embraced by international and non-governmental organisations. However, as she points out, it has been adopted very enthusiastically by states and private companies involved in the security sector. Here the emerging discourse is concerned with migration associated with illegality, terrorism, and threats to the state. This nexus is only concerned with a limited part of migration: that which can be produced as threat – the movement of the poor, the ‘unskilled’, the undocumented. While states compete to keep such migrants out, at the same time they are engaged in the competition to attract global talent, in other words to maximise the immigration of elites. Failure in this competition is seen as a threat to the future of the national economy, but this discussion is excluded from the migration-security nexus.

The subsequent analysis of relationship between the migration-development nexus and the migration-security nexus is convincing as far as it goes. Invoking security concerns and imposing increasing barriers to entry, especially for those looking to use irregular channels, makes the process of migration ever more expensive, while seeming to do little to reduce the flow of people. Raising these costs inevitably cuts into the ‘profits’ of moving for the migrant and thereby reduces the remittances flows. Moreover, the constant threat of deportation can undermine the position of migrants and make it much more difficult for them to contribute to development, either through remittances, investment or return visits. However, given that the vast majority of migration does not take place through these illegal channels – even from poor to wealthy countries – I suspect that this impact of the securitisation of migration might have a marginal bearing on overall flows of remittances and the potential contribution to development.

The analysis becomes more compelling when it turns to consider the role of markets and commercial interests in shaping the evolving nexus between migration, security and development. Here the distinction between the horizontal market and the vertical market is appealing as a heuristic device but I am not convinced that it adequately reflects the imbalances of power between different states and corporations. In the horizontal market, migration management is seen as a foreign policy issue in its own right. In this market, states take on responsibility for hosting asylum seekers, or allow other states to carry out extra-territorial border controls in their territory in exchange for cash, development aid, or access to labour markets for their citizens. While it is valuable to analyse such market rationales for the evolution of migration policy, it is hardly a horizontal exchange between equal bargaining partners. There is a hierarchy of states and the terms of exchange are likely to be loaded towards those with greater financial muscle and negotiating power. That is not to say the outcome is invariably in favour of the wealthy. For example, Libya under Qaddafi proved able to use migration as a valuable bargaining tool in its negotiations with Italy and the EU to achieve its own interests of reintegration into the international community (Paoletti 2011).

The vertical migration market is concerned with the privatisation of migration management functions, in particular airline carrier sanctions, privately run immigration detention facilities and increasingly the provision and operation of border control technologies. To what extent does it make sense to describe this as a *vertical* market? When we come to some of the companies concerned we are talking about entities with larger turnovers than some states. For example in 2011, seven African states had a larger GDP than the revenue of the Boeing Corporation (\$20 billion), and only twelve exceeded the turnover of the security company G4S (£7.5 billion).<sup>1</sup>

Despite such critiques, Sørensen’s market analysis brings to the fore the range of interests that are concerned to perpetuate the ‘migration-development-security nexus’.<sup>2</sup> This is a very valuable contribution to

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<sup>1</sup> Sources World Bank dataset <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>; [http://www.boeing.com/news/releases/2012/q1/120125a\\_nr.pdf](http://www.boeing.com/news/releases/2012/q1/120125a_nr.pdf); <http://www.g4s.com/en/Investors/Corporate%20overview/>

<sup>2</sup> I doubt that it makes sense to talk of the ‘migration-development-security nexus’ but this is another discussion.

the literature and hopefully others will contribute to these debates. Following the money may be a difficult but important step towards holding these market mechanisms up to greater scrutiny.

I return now to the discussion about the nature of a nexus and some reflection on the term stimulated by Sørensen's article. This forced me back to the dictionary,<sup>3</sup> which offers two definitions of nexus which seem relevant here: i) 'a means of connection between things or parts' or; ii) 'a central point or point of convergence'. In either of these senses, unlike Sørensen, perhaps we need not be confined to pairing areas of public policy. Instead we could examine the nexuses between academic disciplines or broad social processes, such as migration and development. This would look rather different as we would then be concerned with the full range of ideas of development which takes us far beyond the world of 'intentional development' (Cowen and Shenton 1995) which is subject to policy. Likewise, as Sørensen points out, the notion of security encompasses a much broader set of ideas than 'traditional security'; for example human security (Paris 2001) or ontological security (Mitzen 2006; Noble 2005). However, if we take this approach we may as well abandon the fancy academic language of the *nexus* and instead write of the *relationship*, the *links* and so forth.

Having long been sceptical about the multiplication of nexuses in the academic literature, I now find myself thinking that the particular value of the term may be precisely when it is focused on this pairing of arenas of public policy along with the process of discourse creation outlined above. The problem comes when the nexus – whether migration-development or migration-security – is seen as representing the whole story, with the result that little attention is paid to the wider and the much more complex, contested and nuanced set of relationships. This is what I fear has happened in much of the literature on migration and development, which tends to adopt a very narrow conception of development that fails to recognise its sedentary bias (Bakewell 2008). Likewise, the discussion on the relationship between migration and security tends to focus on 'traditional security'. Instead of being bound by the nexus talk, which traps us in policy categories and concerns, and has made the discussion rather stale, there may be much to be gained by examining the relationships between the broader concepts of migration, development and security that take us outside the policy world. This may provide refreshing insights and understanding that could in turn lead to an extremely valuable and powerful critique on public policy.

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition, September 2003.

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