

# Migration and Development

New perspectives on the Mexico-US and Morocco-EU comparison

International  
Migration  
Institute

IMI



UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD

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**The added value brought by migrants should be considered as a potentially accelerating rather than a driving force for development in origin countries.** This insight and others relating to the position and responsibility of governments came out of a recent study tour organised by the International Migration Institute (IMI). The tour was part of the 'Transatlantic Dialogues' project, which compares Mexico-US and Morocco-EU migration systems and migration and development issues, and looks at the role played by migrants in development and the impacts of migrants' interventions.

## Overview

In March 2010, IMI organised a second study tour as part of its research project 'Transatlantic Dialogues on Migration and Development Issues: the Mexico-US and Morocco-EU Experiences'. The five-day tour took place in Ouarzazate, southern Morocco, and included presentations, discussions and three full days of field visits. A total of 26 participants from academic, policy and civil society sectors (including migrant organisations) from the US, Mexico, Europe and Morocco contributed to the lively discussions and successful outcome.

The field visits enabled participants to observe migrants' and returnees' investments as well as the wider socio-economic, demographic and political impacts of migration. The confrontation with these realities in the field exposed participants to the diversity of such impacts. This sparked discussions

on the conditions which explain such diversity, and on how policies can contribute to increasing the positive development impacts of migration. Discussions revolved around four main issues:

- the role of the state
- the diverse types of engagement of migrants in development
- the mixed impacts of migration on development
- the need to reframe the migration and development debate

This policy brief summarises the main points, making some comparisons with the first study tour, which was held in Zacatecas, Mexico in March 2009 and attended by mostly the same participants. This brief proposes how migration and development policies could be improved and provides ideas for future comparative research.

## The presence/absence of the state

Both the Moroccan and Mexican states have devised strategies to involve migrants in development efforts, although their approach is different. Nonetheless, in both countries, the involvement of migrants and their 'hometown organisations' in village-based projects is largely spontaneous and autonomous and seems to underline an insufficient capacity of governments to promote development in rural areas.



Saffron farmers in Morocco (photograph by Evelyn Ersanilli)

- In the wake of structural adjustment policies, the relative absence of the Moroccan state from rural development has **left a vacuum** which encouraged migrant and village organisations to take charge. In Mexico, the lack of a national development strategy to provide public services and promote rural development has led to similar **substitution effects**.
- There is a striking difference in the way in which Morocco and Mexico approach migration and development. In Morocco, the government does not co-fund migrant activities but focuses on general policies to boost rural agricultural and tourism development, while the Mexican government funds migrants' infrastructural projects directly through the 'Tres por uno' programme, but these development activities are not part of a broader development strategy.
- Some migrant organisations and European development agencies have created **co-funding schemes**, which foster collaboration between migrants and traditional development actors, in order to support development initiatives, sometimes in areas such as public infrastructure that can be seen as governments' responsibility. In Morocco, however, some migrant organisations have used their role in rural development projects to **persuade the government that development is possible** and is ultimately its responsibility.
- The co-funding schemes have **created a demand for support from migrants** who previously did not have any intention to invest in Morocco. It is a contentious issue whether such scarce funds should not be used to satisfy the demands of (poorer) non-migrants.



An old Casbah transformed into a guesthouse and camping grounds by a former migrant and his family (photograph by Evelyn Ersanilli)

- Migrant-initiated development schemes are based on the idea that they will encourage return and discourage migration, by creating local economic and employment opportunities. Paradoxically, **migration becomes a medicine to stop migration**. This is based on the debatable stance that migration is undesirable and that development will reduce migration.

## Migrants' diverse roles in development

Migrants have been a conduit for the exchange of information and resources between places of residence and origin communities. Because of this capacity, migrants are often seen as agents of development who can add value by bringing resources and alternative perspectives to development, and can add pressure for government reforms.

But why should migrants be expected to have a particular interest in charity work or in rural development through collective investments in services and infrastructure, when development is generally carried out by governmental or non-governmental agencies, or by charities?

The expectation that migrants would prioritise collective development projects must be reconsidered. Evidence suggests that the expenditure and investment choices made by migrants primarily reflect their legitimate individual interest in improving the livelihoods of their own families and, to a certain extent, communities. It is unclear why migrants should be burdened with responsibilities that normally belong to national governments and other development agencies.

Migrants can accelerate development through remittance expenditure and investment if general development conditions are favourable in regions of origin. However, the extent to which this is possible also depends on the skills and profiles of migrants. The migrant categories encountered during the field visits were:

- Migrants who are still away and rely on family members to manage their investment in their absence. Return is therefore not a condition for development.
- Returned migrants who have had a long-term plan for investment and are in the process of implementation. Return migration due to a failed migration experience is not likely to yield development activities.

- Retired 'pendulum' migrants who divide their time between country of origin and country of settlement, and who manage their investment through transnational connections.
- Highly skilled migrants who can either contribute through direct investment or through the transfer of skills, such as the on-the-job hotel management training provided by the owner of a guesthouse to the local young people he employs (this migrant received formal training in hotel management during his stay in France).
- Internal migrants, who are numerous but rarely taken into consideration, also remit, build houses and belong to hometown organisations created by internal migrants.
- Women and children still hold a secondary role in migration and development. In southern Morocco, women and children of emigrants were a visible part of the landscape as they worked in the fields, weaved carpets and produced handicrafts for tourists. Many Moroccan women have also migrated themselves. However, they play a minor role in male-dominated migrant and village associations and seemed to benefit less from development initiatives.

## Impacts of migration on development

It is difficult to define migration impacts on development as either 'positive' or 'negative', because the outcome is heavily dependent on the perspective and timeframe adopted in the evaluation. Some observations to improve our understanding include:

- Many migrants and their families have benefited from migration by improving their standard of living, buying land and water and investing in commercial enterprises. At the same time, migration-induced change has often coincided with increasing social and economic inequalities. For instance, the more dynamic migrant investors appeared to belong to village elite families. This calls into question the idea that migration automatically leads to poverty reduction.
- Migrants' inclination to invest varies according to the specific migration and integration experiences. Greater integration in the receiving societies often coincides with increased capabilities to invest in the origin country. While it is unclear how levels of integration affect migrants' engagement in transnational activities,

the assumption that transnational behaviour is a sign of bad integration is disputable.

- Migrants' activities and types of investments change over time. Until the 1990s, in southern Morocco most investments were in land, housing, education, and individual enterprises such as taxis and grocery stores. The housing investment has generated local employment and at the same time encouraged urbanisation. These houses are a secure form of investment for migrants who return for their holidays and who plan to return upon retirement. More recently, commercial investments appear to have increased and diversified to include income-generating projects in domains as varied as tourism, agriculture and agriculture-related industry.
- The general investment conditions in the countries and regions of origin greatly affect migrants' inclination to invest. Projects that are created within a national strategy for growth, such as Morocco's national '2010 Vision', projects that boost investment in tourism, or government schemes that support farmers to introduce drip irrigation or olive agriculture, encourage migrants to invest.
- The general conditions of a region of origin, including its history and traditions, influence the type and frequency of migrants' involvement. The ancient trading traditions found in the region of Ouarzazate might explain the dynamism found among migrants and their associations.
- If hometown organisations become too involved in co-funding private investments and development schemes, there could be a risk of dependency and a lack of entrepreneurial spirit.

## Reframing the debate

The idea of 'making migration work for development' is laden with assumptions and unrealistic expectations of migrants. Evidence suggests that:

- Migrants' interests in development are primarily driven by legitimate individual and family needs. Only secondarily are migrants interested in promoting the development of entire communities and regions.
- Unfavourable economic and political conditions at the local, regional and national levels make investments and development projects difficult

to design and implement, and often lead to their failure.

- Migrants can find themselves in very difficult situations when they commit their hard-earned money to self-fund private enterprises in environments that cannot support business development. Pushing migrants to invest in those conditions could be seen not only as a useless exercise, but also as an irresponsible act.

Because development is a condition to attract income-generating investments by migrants, it is necessary to reverse the perspective on migration and development. We should adopt a new 'development and migration' approach which compels policy makers to stop asking what migrants can do to support development, and rather to start helping us to identify how we can make the institutions, infrastructure and investment conditions attractive so that migrants will find investment opportunities in their communities of origin.

## Informing policies

- Policies that include migrants in the development process should de-emphasise the responsibility of migrants in development and should not presume that migrants will return.
- More attention must be paid to the limitation of migrants' earnings in destination countries and the financial risks taken by migrants when they become involved in development projects.
- Migrant organisations operate differently in Mexico and Morocco. Migrant organisations can benefit by organising in networks to increase their influence in negotiations with policy makers in origin and destination countries. The national network of Mexican hometown organisations has shown comparative effectiveness in promoting migrants' interests, lobbying for their rights and giving them a voice both in the US and in Mexico. The fragmentary composition of Moroccan migrant organisations in the EU has given them a weaker lobbying power in the receiving countries, but they have a stronger focus on development in Morocco than they do in Mexico.

- The independent nature of many migrants' initiatives does not require state intervention. However, for investments that involve specialised activities and high risk (e.g. a cultivation of 80 hectares of land outside of the oasis for the production of dates), government agencies could play an important role by providing training and ongoing technical assistance.
- Public policies must improve local and regional development conditions to create opportunities for investment and participation of migrants and non-migrants alike. A large number of emigrants' investments and initiatives in Morocco yielded more positive effects if they were part of an overall development strategy and took place in growth sectors. However, targeting only migrants as potential beneficiaries excludes (often poorer) non-migrants who might have innovative ideas but who do not benefit from any funding schemes.
- The restrictive immigration policies of EU states and the US have marginalised migrants, undermined their rights and limited their circulation, thereby decreasing their initiatives and the development potential of migration.

## Future project activities

The two study tours have generated numerous questions and hypotheses which IMI plans to explore through future research. The Mexico-US and the Morocco-EU migration systems display many similar traits, despite the historical, political, cultural, linguistic and religious differences. The high degree of variation in migration patterns and development impacts across regions within each country suggests that a meaningful comparative study should be conducted at the regional level.

In the spirit of the 'Transatlantic Dialogues' project, research should be conducted to meet all academic standards but should also be relevant to migrant organisations and policy makers. This requires their continuous engagement in the research process. In particular, the research teams are committed to generating materials for dissemination that are evidence-based, yet in formats that are accessible outside of academia.

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**Contact:** [imi@qeh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:imi@qeh.ox.ac.uk); [www.imi.ox.ac.uk](http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk)