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Migrating – an informed decision

Migrations are currently at the heart of the political, social, and economic debate.

Migration flows are exploited by political movements, especially by the far right, and are more often portrayed as threats to a 'national identity' of immigration countries rather than as economic opportunities.

Very rarely does the debate pay real attention to migrants as individuals, except to recount their dramatic odysseys or to accuse them of having bad intentions of a criminal or terrorist nature.

Yet, **migrants are people like anyone else**. Like anyone else, they make their decisions on the basis of the information they have. This also applies to the question of whether to migrate or to stay.

Hungerexplained, has already made an attempt to debunk some myths about migrations [\[read\]](#). This new text looks into what matters most in the decision to migrate (or stay), as it is believed that a better understanding of what determines the choice to migrate or stay helps to understand what could eventually be done to create the conditions for more people having the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations without having to leave their home.



Some of our readers may be surprised to find that, in fact, what weighs in the decision to migrate is not fundamentally different from what matters in other important life choices that we are all called upon to make.

Some people absolutely want to oppose **chosen migration** and **forced migration**, the latter ultimately being the only acceptable one in their opinion, and justifying compassion or solidarity. For others, this distinction seems artificial. For what is forced migration when hundreds of millions of people in the world do not migrate when they face extreme situations: war, climate crisis, ultra-violent political repression?

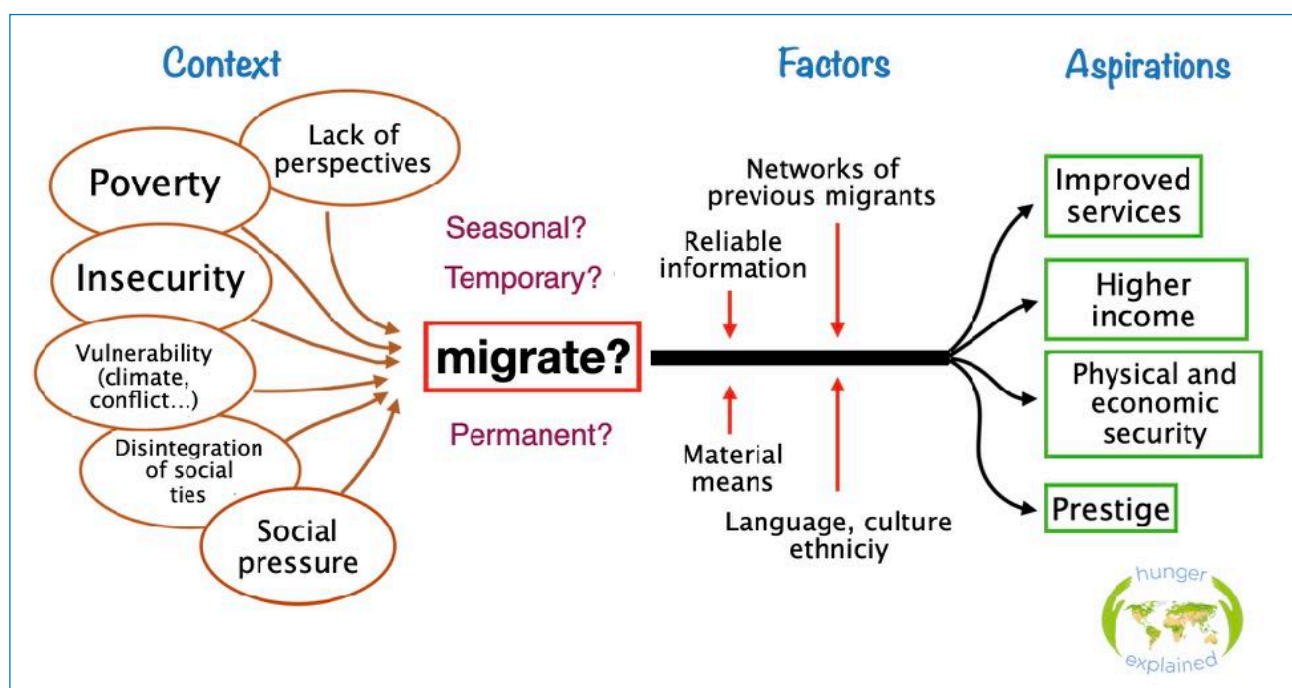
Consider these Ukrainians who remain in their village when it risks being bombed and conquered by the Russian, the repressed Iranians women who fight for freedom at the risk of their lives, the Palestinians bombed, starved, tossed about by Israeli occupation forces and threatened with deportation... How is it that a majority of them does not migrate while those who did migrate are considered as forced migrants?

The elements of choice

Based on the literature on this topic and the observation and discussion with potential migrants, one can break down the choice to migrate – or not – and that of the nature of the envisaged migration (seasonal, temporary, or permanent) into three essential elements (read [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)): (i) the context at the starting point and the possible prospects for improvement, (ii) the aspirations linked to the destination point, and (iii) on the way, the factors of the cost of migrating.

Figure 1 below shows the details of these three elements.

Figure 1 – The elements of choice



The context at the starting point

It comprises:

- the level of poverty and of physical and economic insecurity,
- the various sources of vulnerability (e.g. the consequences of climate change and of environmental degradation, the intensity of conflicts or political repression),
- the disintegration of social ties (solidarity within families, communities or nations, weakening or lack of structures and institutions providing a social and economic integration framework),
- the intensity of social pressure creating or limiting possibilities of choice or change (e.g. decision power by the elders, men/women domination, diverse social obligations), and the presence or absence of perspectives of improvements addressing individual or group aspirations.

Aspirations and prospects at the point of destination

They can be regrouped under four main dimensions:

- the availability of enhanced services (e.g. education, health, culture and leisure, transportation),
- a higher income allowing both a better standard of living and the provision of support to the family members left behind,
- greater physical and economic security (protection from private or public/ political insecurity, social laws providing protection at work and in old age),
- peer consideration and increased prestige at both the destination and departure points.

Cost factors

In this context, the concept of ‘cost’ will be extended to include the difficulties and risks encountered during the migration phase, as well as in the collection of required information to organise it and identify opportunities at the point of destination.

It includes:

- the material resources needed for migrating, including the financial cost of the journey, as well as any amounts to be paid to potential coyotes, particularly but not exclusively in the case of international migrations, as well as the means to survive before being able to earn a living at destination – these resources could be personal or sourced from family or community, the latter taking the form of loans or a variety of commitments,
- the challenges of gathering reliable information about the journey and the conditions prevailing at the point of destination.

This notion can also be linked to the existence of networks of prior migrants who can facilitate access to information, assist in travel, and above all, ease reception and the search for sources of income at destination.

From this perspective, the choice by migrants of their point of destination often depends on the language spoken there, on the local culture, and on the ethnicity of the migrant communities living there.

Influencing the decision to migrate – or not

The analysis of decision-making elements helps to identify factors that either encourage or discourage migration, and that could be the subject of policy measures in favour of or against migration.

Yet, the effect of these factors in one way or another is not always clear.

Two examples illustrate this ambiguity:

- **Poverty** and the **lack of positive economic prospects** may seem to be obvious factors in favour of migration. However, migration requires resources, making it difficult for extremely poor individuals to gather the necessary resources to migrate, even within the same country (for instance, in the case of rural-urban migrations).
At the international level, it is clear that migratory flows between middle-level income countries and rich countries are much greater than those between poor countries and rich countries, as these countries have more people with the necessary resources to migrate [read [here](#) and [here](#)].
- The **disintegration of social bonds** and the weakening of solidarity can also be seen as a factor encouraging migration. However, this deterioration can affect the links that would support mechanisms of solidarity at the point of destination, and in some cases, it could limit social pressure that pushes towards migration certain groups or individuals (e.g. dominance imposed on women or on ethnic, religious and sexual minorities).

Many more nuances need to be considered when analysing factors that encourage or hinder migration, and when figuring out the measures that could be implemented to promote or, on the contrary, discourage it. As often is the case, generalisation can be misleading and the specific context remains crucial, with its analysis being essential for understanding clearly and possibly influencing the decisions made in a specific location and at a particular point in time.

Conclusion

This short text aims to emphasise that the decision to migrate is complex and difficult, as it impacts the future of an individual or a group. It is an informed and rational choice, whether the reasoning upon which it is based is clearly articulated by the person making the decision or not.

People never migrate ‘for pleasure’, but out of necessity or hope.

In this sense, the choice to migrate does not appear fundamentally different from most decisions made in daily life. It is simply among the most important and often the most dramatic and risky decisions that one can ever make.

Being aware of this helps to look at migrants from a new perspective.

Let us never forget that **most of us are migrants or descendants of migrants**, whether rural individuals migrating to cities, regional migrants seeking better living conditions in a neighbouring country, or international migrants undertaking often dangerous and uncertain odysseys to reach the other side of the world.

To know more

- OIM, [World Migration Report 2024](#), International Organization for Migration, 2024.
- Czaika, M., Bijak, J., & Prike, T., [Migration Decision-Making and Its Key Dimensions](#), The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 697(1), 15–31, 2021.
- Carling J. and C. Talleraas, [Root causes and drivers of migration – Implications for humanitarian efforts and development cooperation](#), Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2016.
- Flahaux, M.L., and De Haas, H., [African migration: trends, patterns, drivers](#). Comparative migration studies, 4, pp.1–25. 2016.
- Bodvarsson, O.B., N. B. Simpson and C. Sparber, [Chapter 1 – Migration Theory](#), Editor(s): B. R. Chiswick, P. W. Miller, Handbook of the Economics of International Migration, North-Holland, Volume 1, 2015.
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Watch

- Héran, F., [Théories de la migration : la modélisation des causes](#), Collège de France, 2019 (in French).

Selection earlier articles published on [hungerexplained](#) and linked to this topic

- [Four myths about migrations...](#), 2023.
- [\(The minimum of\) What you should know about migration...](#), 2018.

Also consult other articles of our thematic page on « [Migrations](#) ».