

## **Towards a Migrant-Centred Perspective on International Migration: The Contribution of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1 Introduction**

International migration, a phenomenon narrowly connected to the interrelated, more general processes of capitalist accumulation, economic specialisation, urbanisation, post-colonial expansion (Des Haas 2009), as well as demographic expansion, deep economic crises, climate change, armed conflict and political repression (Campillo and Gaspar 2010: 9; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2009), represents one of the most controversial aspects of globalisation. This is due both to the stronger constraints human international mobility faces compared to the circulation of goods and capitals (Stalker 2000; Bagchi 2008; Hanson 2010) and to the variety of features that the relations between migrants and their home and host society can assume (de Haas 2009).

The complex nature of such relations is partially explained by the need to take into account that migrants, who differ from each other in a series of personal characteristics, decide to move for a number of reasons and are backed by very diverse political, social and economic conditions. As a result, migrants rely upon unequal emotional, financial, cultural and social assets when they arrive in their receiving country. The latter, in turn, is characterized by multiple combinations of economic conditions, welfare arrangements, prevailing ideologies concerning migration and migrants and, therefore, by diverse policies regulating the entry and the settlement of different kinds of people with a foreign background.

Several theories have been developed within different disciplines to explain and/or analyse international migration. The literature on the economics of immigration has contributed to such a scholarship by adopting both a macro and a micro perspective. The former sees international migration as the consequence of geographic differences in the supply of and demand for labour. The latter is characterized by a rational choice perspective which identifies the individual as the unit of analysis and assumes that his/her decision to emigrate is the outcome of a rational cost–benefit calculation, leading him/her to expect a positive net return from movement (Borjas 1990).

Both micro and macro approaches have been criticized for their deterministic approach, rationalism and ontological individualism (see, e.g., Massey et al. 1993; Samers 2010; Pessar 1999). Over the last decades, social scientists belonging to a range of different disciplines (for

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a comprehensive and critical review of such a literature see Massey 1993; Boyle 1998, Samers 2010) have developed a number of theories that deal with some of these problematic issues. Some recent research - i.e. the 2009 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2009) and the papers published by the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* in the 2010 Thematic Issue on Human Mobility – has shown that also the Human Development - Capability Approach (HDCA) can contribute to meet the need for expanding the debate on migration and development beyond a merely economic perspective by accounting for the different characteristics of migrants, the multiple motives for which they decide to migrate, as well as by overcoming the nation state approach.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on international migration by proposing a theoretical model which, taking advantage of the explanatory power provided by an integrated reading of the main existing theories about international migration, is able to overcome some of the pitfalls of the neo-classical economic approach to migration and to bring to the forefront migration as a fundamental capability.

In the remainder of the paper, after presenting the main critical aspects of neo-classical approaches to migration, I introduce my capability-based framework to migration. I conclude with a brief discussion on the most suitable methods to operationalize such a model.

## **2 A critical overview of Neo-classical approaches to international migration<sup>2</sup>**

Originally developed to explain labor migration in the process of economic development, macro-economic approaches (Lewis 1954; Ranis and Fei 1961; Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro 1976) identify geographic differences in the supply of and demand for labour as main cause of international migration. Labour markets are the main drivers of international flows of labour. Countries with a large labour supply relative to capital have a low equilibrium market wage, while countries with a limited endowment of labour relative to capital are characterized by a high market wage. The resulting differential in wages attracts workers from the low-wage countries to high-wage ones. As a consequence of this movement, the supply of labour decreases and wages rise in capital-poor countries, while the supply of labour increases and wages fall in capital-rich countries, leading, at equilibrium, to an international wage differential that reflects only the monetary and psychological costs of international movement. Associated with the flow of workers from labour-abundant to labour-scarce countries is a flow of investment capitals. The latter are attracted towards poor countries because they have a higher rate of return in countries where they are relatively scarce. The movement of capital also includes human capital, with highly skilled workers moving from capital-rich to capital-poor countries in order to increase the returns on their skills in a human capital-scarce environment. Due to the heterogeneity of immigrants in terms of skills, the international flow of labour must be kept conceptually distinct from the associated international flow of human capital.

Corresponding to the macroeconomic theories are microeconomic models (e.g. Sjaastad 1962; Todaro 1969; 1976; 1989) which postulate that international movement stems from international differentials in both earnings and employment rates. Migration occurs until expected earnings have been equalized internationally. Individual rational actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return from migration. Indeed potential migrants estimate the costs (e.g. the costs of travelling, the costs

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<sup>2</sup> This section is largely based on Massey (1993: 433-436).

of maintenance while moving and looking for work, the effort involved in learning a new language and culture, the difficulty experienced in adapting to a new labour market, and the psychological costs of cutting old ties and creating new ones) and benefits of moving to alternative international locations and migrate where the expected discounted net returns are greatest over some time horizon (Borjas 1990). Other things being equal, individual human capital characteristics that increase the likely rate of remuneration or the probability of employment in the destination relative to the sending country, as well as individual characteristics, social conditions, or technologies that lower migration costs will increase the likelihood of international movement.

Neo-classical theories have been object to a number of criticisms. Among others, Massey et al. (1993), Pessar (1999), Samers (2010) have noticed how micro approaches representing migrants as ahistorical rational economic actors who respond only to real or expected earning differentials are not able to conceptualize migrants in an adequate way and to take into account the actual mechanisms that explain migrants' choices to leave. As far as the first aspect is concerned, conceiving migrants as abstract subjects devoid of any personal attributes prevents such theories to account for the impact that characteristics such as gender, age, class and race have on migration. As for the latter aspect, neo-classical approaches fail to acknowledge that the economic motive is only one of the possible reasons why migrants decide to leave and that such a decision is rarely taken in isolation, away from the influence of external forces and processes of transformation. As a matter of fact, migrants do not always move to regions characterized by higher wages or more work opportunities (Massey et al. 1998). Certainly this is not the case for those migrants, such as asylum-seekers, who are mostly hosted in the low/medium- income countries neighbouring those from which they leave. On the other hand, neo-classical macro-approaches depict migrants as factors of production and/or as puppets at the mercy of economic forces rather than as human beings endowed with agency. In sum, both versions of the neo-classical theory suffer from three main pitfalls, i.e. a deterministic approach, rationalism and ontological individualism.

Over time several other theories have been developed to explain international migration. Samers (2010) groups these approaches into two big sets, i.e. a group of more determinist theories (i.e. theories that on their own determine migration, behaviour and patterns), and a group of more integrative approaches, i.e. theories that combine different theoretical and conceptual propositions. The former set includes, in addition to neo-classical approaches, behaviouralist theories (e.g. Clark 1986; Wolpert 1965), new economics approaches (see, for instance, Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor 1986) and structuralist approaches (e.g. dependency theory, articulation of modes of production theory, world systems theory, globalization arguments, global city arguments, neo-liberalism, the idea of migration-development nexus, institutional theory - for a review of these approaches see Samers 2010: 67-85; Massey et al. 1993: 444-448). The group of integrative approaches encompasses the network theory (see, among others, Massey 1990; Gurak and Caces 1992; Orrenius 1999; Orrenius and Zavodny 2005; Dolfin and Genicot 2010), transnational studies (see, e.g., Basch, Glick-Schiller and Blanc (1994); Vertovec 1999; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999; Faist, 2008); feminist and gender-sensitive literature on international migration (for reviews of this scholarship see e.g. Kelson and Da Laet, 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Silvey, 2004) and structurationist theories (see e.g. Goss and Linquist, 1995; Halfacree, 1995). Thanks to their abundance and multidisciplinary character, these theories are able to illuminate international migration from very different angles. However, with the exception of some

structurationist and gender-sensitive studies, each approach overcomes only one or few of the flaws that characterize neo-classical theories.

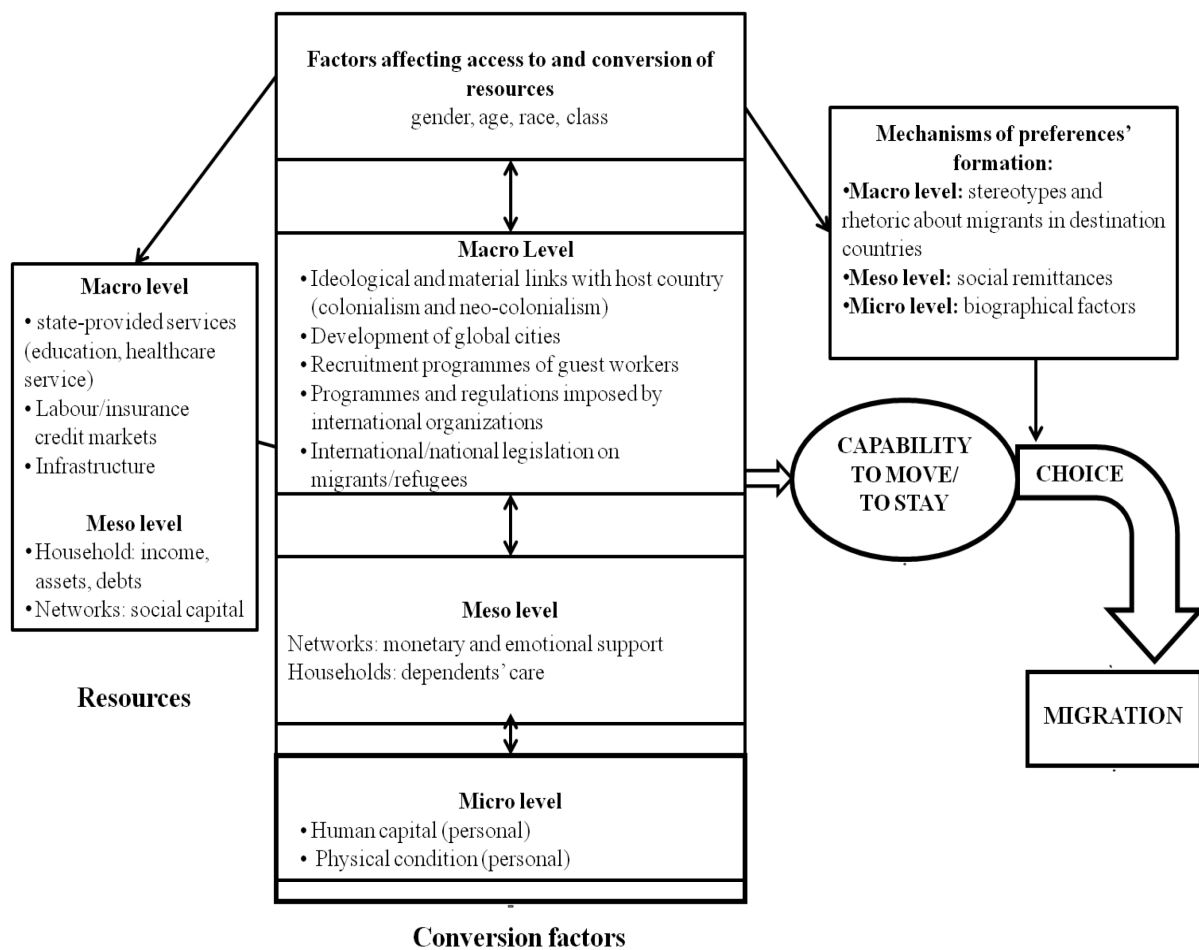
In the next paragraph I aim to contribute to the literature of integrative approaches by proposing an analytical and normative framework which, resorting to the theoretical tools provided by the CA, overcome these limits in a comprehensive way.

### **3 Cross-border migration: a Capability Approach perspective**

Several intellectual traditions of classical philosophy have identified the ability to change one's place of residence as a fundamental component of human freedom (UNDP 2009:15). In recent times Martha Nussbaum (2006: 76) has included mobility in her list of 10 fundamental capabilities. Resting upon this choice, the 2009 Human Development Report has defined human mobility as 'the ability of individuals, families or groups of people to choose their place of residence', whereas human movement (i.e. its related functioning) is the act of changing one's place of residence. Figure 1 represents the capability framework as visualized by Robeyns (2005a) and adapted in order to account for migrant's peculiarities. It shows that the ability to choose where to leave is conditioned, as any other capability, to both the capacity of the individual to access a certain bundle of goods and services and to the existence of enabling factors that allow him/her to convert such resources into the actual opportunity to move or stay in one's selected location. An act of choice is necessary in order to transform the capability to move into migration. Such decision is exposed to a range of personal and socio-cultural influences.

Migration can enhance migrants' well-being both through its intrinsic and its instrumental value. The former refers to the value of migration as a freedom experience *per se*; the latter depends on the effect that movement produces on other relevant dimensions of migrants' capability set. More specifically, the 2009 HDR contends that human mobility is likely to affect four main dimensions of human development – that is, i) livelihoods, ii) health, iii) education, iv) empowerment, civic rights and participation. As observed by de Haas and Rodriguez (2010), a direct and positive impact of migration on the overall well-being of individual migrants and their capabilities cannot be taken for granted. If migration results from trafficking, slavery, insecurity or other kinds of coercions, it does not represent an expansion of people's well-being. On the contrary, by negatively affecting the process aspect of freedom (2002: 585) i.e. "whether the person was free to choose herself, whether others intruded or obstructed, and so on." (Sen 2002:10), such constraints are likely to impact negatively also on other dimensions of migrants' capability set. Under certain circumstances, enhanced mobility might therefore consist of the freedom to stay in one's selected location (de Haas 2009).

Figure 1: A Capability Approach to migration



Source: Adapted from Robeyns (2005a)

In what follows I unpack the set of resources and factors which, interacting with would-be migrants agency, determine an expansion or a reduction of the capability to move and influence their decision to move or to stay. The capability framework is particularly suitable to carry out this task for two reasons. First, due to its nature of open paradigm (Robeyns 2005a), it is possible to explore such resources and factors taking advantage of the different theories on international migration, thus rejecting any univocal and deterministic explanation of migration. Second, as pointed out by Biggeri et al. (2010) the capability framework enables one to articulate the analysis of such resources and factors distinguishing between three levels of analysis - i.e. the micro, the meso and the macro one. The former corresponds to individual migrants, the second to their households and networks, while the macro level consists of national governments and political, economic, financial supra-national institutions.

### *Sets of Resources in Migratory Processes*

The first issue to be examined concerns the resources that are instrumentally necessary to migrants for getting the capability to move. Figure 1 shows that at the meso level they derive from would-be migrant's households and consists of its income, assets and debts. Indeed, as pointed out by new economic approaches, migration decisions are usually taken by families or households. As a consequence resources deriving from households are crucial endowments

for migrants. Another important kind of resource belonging to the meso level is represented by the social capital made available by migration networks. The economic literature on the role of migrants' networks (e.g. Bertoli 2010) shows that this kind of capital can compensate for the scarceness of educational and financial resources of future migrants. At the macro level, resources available to would-be migrants are represented by the infrastructures, state-provided services (notably the educational system), labour, insurance and credit markets available in the country of origin.

The possibility to transform such goods and services into a valued capability depends on two sets of factors: i) factors that affect a person's ability to establish a command over such resources; ii) enabling conversion factors. Although in some cases these two sets of factors overlap, both from an analytical and policy perspective it is important to distinguish between them. Indeed, only such a distinction allows understanding whether the principal source of disparities in well-being freedom lies in a curtailment of the person's agency (Iversen 2003:105) or in unequal abilities to convert goods into capabilities.

#### *Set of factors affecting migrants' access to resources*

As discussed above, the new economics of migration and the network theory have identified two crucial sources of endowments for migrants. However, none of them has considered how some personal characteristics, most notably gender and age, affect the capacity of the different members of households and networks to negotiate the access to the available resources. The new economics school fails to consider how household's cost-benefit calculations may also be affected by what Pessar's defines as the "household political economy" (1999: 57), thus neglecting that households are places where pervasive cooperation often coexists with extensive conflict (Sen 1990).

Likewise, except for few exceptions (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), network theorists have treated migrants as genderless subjects (Taylor 1986). As a result, network scholars have largely overlooked that women are often excluded by the social capital provided by traditionally male networks. Conversely, such an obstacle might encourage them to use their agency to establish alternative networks through which they might escape the patriarchal vigilance and control that characterize traditional family networks (Pessar 1999: 61). Also access to goods and services provided by national governments of origin countries, for instance education, can be limited on the basis of a person's gender or race either by the state legislation or by other household's members.

Although it would go beyond the scope of this paper to analyse how power relations based on gender, race or class limit would-be migrants access to household, network and national goods and services, it is important to point out that the open nature of the CA allows for incorporating in its framework appropriate theories to examine power dynamics. For instance, Iversen (2003) employs the new literature on household behaviour with a bargaining or game theoretic foundation to examine economic and non-economic sources of power and their impact on the opportunities for women and others to enhance their well-being within the household. At a macro level, institutional racism (e.g. Dominelli 1988; 1991) might provide the right tools to investigate how minorities are denied the possibility to access education or other state-provided services which would provide them with the inputs necessary to get the capability to move.

*Conversion Factors to realise the freedom of movement*

*Macro level*

The various strands of structuralist approaches provide a comprehensive picture of the processes and conversion factors that affect the capability to move at the macro level. According to the dependency theory, the articulation of modes of production theory, and the world systems theory, migration is a natural consequence of disruptions and dislocations produced by the process of capitalist development. As land, raw materials, and labour within peripheral regions come under the influence and control of markets, migration flows are inevitably generated (Massey 1989). Although some of the people displaced by the process of market penetration move to cities, thus leading to the urbanization of developing societies, many are pushed abroad because of the material and ideological links created by the globalization. Indeed, the globalization approach point to the role of transports and communication, as well as of ideological and cultural links in facilitating and promoting migration. Such links, which reflect a colonial past and/or a current neo-colonial domination, reduce or give the impression to reduce the material, psychological, intellectual costs of movement along certain international pathways, thus functioning as powerful enabling conversion factors for would-be migrants. The global city argument connects migration flows with the development of the world economy around a relatively small number of urban centres in which banking, finance, administration, professional services, and high-tech production tend to be concentrated (Castells 1989; Sassen 1991). The concentration of wealth and highly educated workforce within these global cities generates a strong demand for services from unskilled workers. The institutional theory (Massey 1993) point out how the demand of workforce can favour the establishment of ad hoc recruitment programmes from the side of governments, employers' organizations and trade unions in rich or emerging countries, thus fostering the continuation and intensification of migration flow along determined routes. Finally, another strand of structuralist approaches see migrations from both poorer and richer countries as one of the by-products of strategies and regulations imposed by international organizations, e.g. the structural adjustment programmes implemented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or the rules governing international trade established by the World Trade Organizations.

All these processes and factors certainly represent powerful conversion factors which enhance or obstruct the development of the capability to move or stay in one desired location. However, as observed by Samers (2010: 114), the role played by globalization and supra-national economic processes of transformation risks to be overestimated. Indeed, ideological and transportation links have decreased but not eliminate the costs of movement, which remain unaffordable for vast segments of populations. Moreover, supra-national/national laws regulating the right of settlement of different kinds of migrants in destination countries, as well as physical barriers such as walls and fences, built by a number of states to secure their borders, can make very difficult for low income individuals to migrate to the richer countries without facing major obstacles.

*Conversion factors operating at the meso level: households and migration networks*

The material and emotional support provided to would-be migrants by family and network ties represent not only a form of asset but also an important conversion of other kind of resources. For instance, the absence of other family members who remain at home to take care of children and elders, or of ongoing economic activities would reduce the capability to

choose where to live also of a person endowed with financial resources and/or with a high educational level. By decreasing the psychological costs of moving, facilitating access to the job market at destination, and helping would be migrants to cover the monetary costs of migration through the transfer of remittances (Bertoli 2010: 261), networks based on kinship or friendship in the receiving community represent powerful conversion factors in so far as they enable migrants to fully capitalize the education they have received, the monetary resources accumulated within the household etc...

#### *Conversion factors operating at the micro level*

Conversion factors operating at the micro level consist of personal characteristics such as physical condition, sex, literacy and numeracy skills, intelligence, etc...Taking into consideration such factors restore migrants the humanity that neo-classical approaches had neglected by depicting them as rational economic agents. For instance, if a person is in a bad physical condition, the fact of living in a community where many people have already experienced migration is of limited help to enable his/her act of movement. Sex represents a crucial conversion factor in so far as it interacts with conversion factors belonging to the macro-level. Indeed, as observed by Samers (2010), governments encourage differential types of migration among men and women. Moreover, since the late XX century, being a woman has represented a powerful enabling factor of the capability to move. This has been the consequence of the increased demand for female workers in the caring, cleaning and catering sectors which has been triggered by the development of the global cities described above and the transformation occurred in the labour markets of industrialized countries.

#### *Set of factors shaping would-be migrants' choice to move*

The third issue to be inquired concerns the factors influencing would-be migrants' choice to transform the capability to move into its related functioning, i.e. migration. As a liberal philosophical framework, the capability approach respects people' s different ideas of the good life while recognizing that such ideas are profoundly influenced by a number of factors. As observed by Robeyns (2005a) little can be said about the constraints experienced by would-be migrants in general terms as they are closely interwoven with people' s own history and personality (micro level), as well as with the context in which they live (i.e. their community and households) and with the reality they will face in their countries of destination (macro level).

The notion of social remittances, introduced by Levitt (1998) to describe local-level, migration-driven forms of cultural diffusion, is useful in conceptualizing the factors that impact on migrants' preferences at the meso level. Social remittances are the ideas, behaviours and identities that flow from receiving countries to sending communities. They contribute to explain the higher propensity to emigrate characterising sending communities, not only among the people who have already migrated once, but also among the other members. Indeed migration and the values associated with it become part of the repertoire of people' s behaviours and of the community' s shared values, creating what Massey (1993: 452) defines 'cultures of migration' At the macro level, such preferences might be influenced by the rhetoric and stereotypes that prevail around migrants and/or some specific groups of migrants in destination countries (Pessar 1999: 60). For instance Chan (1991) shows how the sexist precepts of the 1875 Page Law of the Chinese Exclusion Act represented a strong deterrent for would-be Chinese immigrant women to transform their



capability to move into migration as these propositions depicted them as potential prostitutes, vehicles of venereal diseases and drug addiction in the USA.

Gender, age, class and race represent key drivers of would-be migrants' choice to move. Their role can be analysed from two perspectives. On one side, ideas about gender, age, class and race hierarchies existing in destination countries are constitutive elements of social remittances, thus shaping and influencing the unconscious of would-be migrants (Pessar 1999). On the other, as pointed out by some gender-sensitive migration literature (e.g. Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotello 1994), they are at the basis of power relations within families, networks and states which mould would be migrants' preferences.

#### **4 Operationalizing the capability-based model to international migration: some preliminary reflections**

The capability approach has been mainly operationalized using quantitative methods (Verd and Lopez 2011). However, the kind of intensive information that is necessary to perform a thorough analysis of the factors that at the micro, meso and macro levels lead the actor to make a particular choice - e.g. the decision to leave- can hardly be captured using solely a quantitative operationalization (Farvaque 2008:70; Verd and Lopez 2011). Indeed, Robeyns (2005b:194) has highlighted how a qualitative approach is useful for dealing with "behaviour that might appear irrational according to traditional economic analysis, or revealing layers of complexities that a quantitative analysis can rarely capture." As a result, I deem that, in order to operationalize the theoretical model I have proposed in this article, it would be necessary to adopt a mixed method approach. Qualitative methods that use life stories as the main empirical material place the individuals and their practices and experiences (along with all relevant contexts) at the centre of the analysis (Verd and Lopez 2011). Such technique can therefore be used to investigate the decision-making process and, in particular, to collect in-depth information regarding the factors operating at the micro and meso levels. Though, the use of life stories seems less appropriate to grasp information about processes and circumstances that are beyond the knowledge or subjectivity of persons, such as the factors belonging to the macro level. The latter can be better explored using secondary data which might consist of both quantitative and qualitative data, such as large scale statistical data, historical and geographic data.

#### **5 Conclusions**

In this paper I have proposed a capability-based framework to international migration. It conceptualises human mobility as a fundamental capability and migration as its related functioning, whose impact on migrants' well-being depends on the interaction between migrants' agency and a range of multi-layered structural factors.

This model seems to be able to overcome the main limits of neo-classical economic theories, i.e. a deterministic approach, rationalism and ontological individualism.

It is an integrative approach which refuses any univocal and deterministic explanation of human movement in so far as it integrates the variety of perspectives, levels, and assumptions provided by the host of theories dealing with international migration into a comprehensive model.

By identifying individual migrants as the units of moral concern, while at the same time acknowledging their social embeddedness, it overcomes ontological individualism and rationalism. Although individual migrants as a subject endowed with agency represent the

unit of analysis and the normative reference of this framework, the latter is able to encompass the different sets of factors that influence would-be migrants' agency (which is understood both as ability to establish command over resources and has capacity to take the decision to move) and ability to convert a certain bundle of goods and services into the capability to move. Such factors have been conceptualized as belonging to different levels of analysis which include structural-macro forces, mediating units such as families and networks, individual influences, and transversal factors, the latter consisting of power relations based on gender, race, class and age.

A mixed method approach and, in particular, an approach which combines life stories techniques with the analysis of secondary data seems the most adequate to operationalize this theoretical model. Indeed a mixed approach would allow integrating the intensive information collected through life stories techniques about the micro and meso factors that intervene on would-be migrants' decision making process with geographical, historical and political data providing information on the national and supra-national processes that influence human mobility.

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