

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3329/jnujles.v10i1.84946>

JnUJLES

Research Article**THEORETICAL INTERSECTION BETWEEN MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT: A BRIEF ANALYSIS****A K M Ahsan Ullah^{1*} and Diotima Chatteraj²**¹*FASS, Universiti of Brunei Darussalam*²*Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**Received: 20 May 2025,**Accepted: 17 June 2025***ABSTRACT**

Migration and development are intricately linked through complex economic, social, and political processes. The theoretical debate surrounding migration and development has evolved over time, shifting from early perspectives that viewed migration as a consequence of underdevelopment to more contemporary views that recognize migration as a driver of development. This paper explores the major theoretical frameworks that shape the discourse on migration and development, including modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, the new economics of labor migration (NELM), and transnationalism. By critically analyzing these theories, this paper aims to illuminate the multifaceted relationship between migration and development and provide insights into contemporary policy debates.

Keywords: *migration and development, theoretical frameworks, economic and social processes, transnationalism, policy debates*

Introduction

Migration—the cross-border movement of people for employment, residence, or refuge—has emerged as a defining feature of the contemporary global landscape, shaped by intersecting economic, political, and environmental forces (Chatteraj, 2024). While migration can catalyze development by mobilizing labour and human capital for receiving countries, it simultaneously poses significant challenges, including brain drain, refugee crises, and heightened social and political tensions. Structural inequalities, conflict, and environmental disruptions continue to drive both voluntary and forced migration, predominantly from the Global South to the Global North. Processes of globalization, along with advancements in connectivity and communication technologies, have further accelerated and diversified migratory flows. With over 281 million international migrants and more than 108 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, migration stands as one of the most urgent and multifaceted global phenomena—deeply embedded in human aspiration, vulnerability, and resilience (Chatteraj, 2024).

Migration and development have been interlinked in both scholarly discourse and policy frameworks. The movement of people across borders is not merely an economic transaction but a process embedded in historical, political, and social structures (King and Collyer, 2016).

* **Correspondence:** akmahsanullah@gmail.com

Migration plays a dual role in shaping development—driving economic growth and human capital, while also posing challenges like brain drain and social tensions (Chattoraj, 2020). This paper examines the key theoretical perspectives that have shaped our understanding of the migration-development nexus and evaluates their applicability in contemporary global migration trends.

The relationship between migration and development has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with debates centering on whether migration serves as a driver of economic and social progress or exacerbates inequalities and dependency (Ullah and Haque, 2020). Traditional perspectives, such as neoclassical economic theories, posit that migration promotes development by facilitating labor mobility, remittances, and knowledge transfer (Massey *et al.*, 1993). However, critical perspectives argue that migration often reinforces structural inequalities, benefiting wealthier nations while leaving migrant-sending countries dependent on remittance economies and vulnerable to brain drain (De Haas, 2010). This article critically examines the theoretical intersections between migration and development.

Scholars have increasingly moved beyond linear models of migration's impact on development, acknowledging its multidimensional nature. The migration-development nexus is shaped by global political economy, governance frameworks, and the agency of migrants themselves (Faist, 2008). Dependency theory, for instance, contends that migration perpetuates underdevelopment by siphoning skilled labor from the Global South to the Global North, reinforcing historical patterns of exploitation (Rodríguez, 2017). In contrast, transnationalism and social network theories highlight migrants' role in fostering economic, social, and political linkages between origin and destination countries, challenging rigid binaries of development and underdevelopment (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

This article critically evaluates these competing theories by assessing empirical evidence from various migration corridors, particularly those involving labor migration, skilled migration, and diaspora engagement. Through the lens of political economy, sociology, and migration studies, it aims to provide a perspective of how migration both enables and constrains development.

Objectives

The aim of this article is to critically analyze the major theoretical frameworks that elucidate the complex relationship between migration and development, highlighting how different perspectives explain the economic, social, and political impacts of migration in both origin and destination countries. Its objectives include examining traditional and contemporary theories such as modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, the new economics of labor migration, and transnationalism, in order to understand their explanations of migration's benefits, such as remittances and knowledge transfer, as well as challenges like brain drain, exploitation, and dependency. Overall, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of these diverse theoretical insights to inform more balanced and effective migration policies that harness migration's potential for sustainable development while mitigating associated risks.

Materials and Methods

This article adopts a qualitative, analytical methodology rooted in an extensive literature review and theoretical synthesis. Rather than generating new empirical data, the authors engage in a conceptual investigation of the migration-development nexus by drawing on and critically

evaluating a broad range of scholarly sources. Central to this approach is the comparative analysis of migration theories, including modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), and transnationalism. These frameworks are not only reviewed individually but are also juxtaposed to highlight their divergent assumptions, conceptual underpinnings, and policy implications.

To enrich this theoretical discussion, the authors incorporate empirical illustrations and case studies—particularly from South and Southeast Asia—to demonstrate how these theories have been applied in real-world contexts. This includes an examination of historical and contemporary migration patterns, state policies, remittance flows, and socio-economic transformations in both sending and receiving countries. By synthesizing these empirical insights with theoretical analysis, the article offers a critical and integrative perspective on how well existing frameworks explain migration's complex role in development.

The methodology is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from development studies, sociology, political economy, and human geography, and engages with both foundational texts and recent scholarly contributions. This integrative approach allows for a nuanced evaluation of each theory's explanatory power, limitations, and relevance to current global migration trends. Ultimately, the methodological aim is to move beyond isolated theoretical accounts and toward a more holistic understanding of migration as a dynamic and contested component of development processes.

Theoretical Perspectives on Migration and Development

The selection of the theories in this article is driven by their comprehensive ability to capture the multifaceted nature of migration and its developmental impacts. The authors identify five key theoretical frameworks—modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), and transnationalism—because each offers distinct insights into different aspects of migration dynamics. Modernization theory emphasizes migration as a pathway to development and modernization, while dependency and world-systems theories address issues of global inequalities, exploitation, and structural dependency that often characterize migration patterns from the Global South to the Global North. The inclusion of NELM provides a microeconomic perspective focusing on household decision-making and social risk mitigation, and transnationalism highlights the fluid, interconnected networks migrants maintain across borders. This diverse selection allows the analysis to encompass macroeconomic, structural, household-level, and transnational dimensions, providing a holistic understanding of migration's complex role in development.

The intersection of migration and development has been analyzed through various theoretical lenses, each offering distinct perspectives on the causes, consequences, and dynamics of migration. This section explores five key theoretical frameworks—Modernization Theory, Dependency Theory, World-Systems Theory, The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), and Transnationalism (de Haas, 2021)—highlighting their relevance to migration and development and providing empirical examples.

Modernization Theory

Modernization Theory, emerging in the mid-20th century, views development as a linear process in which societies transition from traditional to modern economies, largely influenced by Western

capitalist models (Rostow, 1960). Migration, in this framework, is seen as a mechanism for economic advancement, where individuals move from rural, underdeveloped areas to urban, industrialized centers in search of better opportunities. Remittances sent by migrants to their home countries are considered a driver of modernization, fostering entrepreneurship, infrastructure development, and increased access to education and healthcare (Todaro, 1976). For instance, in South Korea, labor migration in the 1960s and 1970s was instrumental in its economic transformation. Workers sent abroad under government programs contributed to remittances that fueled industrialization and human capital development (Song, 2019). However, critics argue that modernization theory oversimplifies migration's role, failing to account for persistent inequalities and the structural barriers migrants face in host countries.

Dependency Theory

In contrast to modernization theory, Dependency Theory (Frank, 1967) challenges the notion that migration automatically fosters development. Instead, it argues that migration reinforces global inequalities by perpetuating the economic dependence of developing countries on wealthier nations. Skilled labor migration, or "brain drain," is a key example, as professionals from the Global South relocate to the Global North, depriving their home countries of vital human capital (Massey *et al.*, 1993). For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, healthcare professionals frequently migrate to Europe and North America, leading to a shortage of doctors and nurses in their home countries (Clemens, 2007). While remittances may provide some economic relief, dependency theorists argue that this flow of capital does not compensate for the structural disadvantages that limit long-term economic autonomy in migrant-sending nations.

World-Systems Theory

World-Systems Theory, developed by Wallerstein (1974), builds on dependency theory by conceptualizing migration as a product of global capitalist expansion. It divides the world into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral economies, arguing that migration is driven by the needs of capitalist economies for cheap labor. Peripheral countries supply labor to core countries, reinforcing global economic hierarchies rather than reducing inequalities. A pertinent example is the migration of Southeast Asian domestic workers to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Migrants from countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka take on low-wage domestic and service sector jobs under precarious conditions, while their remittances help sustain economies back home (Parreñas, 2015). World-systems theorists argue that such migration patterns benefit wealthy economies while keeping peripheral economies dependent on remittance flows rather than structural economic change.

The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM)

NELM, introduced by Stark and Bloom (1985), shifts the focus from macroeconomic structures to household decision-making. Unlike classical economic theories that view migration as an individual rational choice, NELM argues that migration is a collective household strategy to reduce economic risks, access credit, and diversify income sources. This theory highlights how remittances serve as social insurance, allowing families to invest in education, housing, and small businesses. For instance, in Mexico, families often send a member to work in the U.S. to secure

income stability. Studies have shown that remittances contribute to reducing household poverty and funding education, leading to improved social mobility (Taylor, 1999). However, critics note that while NELM explains the short-term benefits of migration, it does not fully address the broader structural constraints that limit long-term economic development in sending regions.

Transnationalism

Transnationalism, as a theoretical framework, emphasizes the sustained social, economic, and political connections migrants maintain across borders (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1995). Unlike earlier theories that viewed migration as a one-way process, transnationalism recognizes how migrants actively contribute to both origin and destination countries, challenging binary understandings of migration and development. A key example is the Indian diaspora's role in shaping economic development in India. Indian migrants in Silicon Valley have facilitated knowledge transfer, investment, and entrepreneurship in India's technology sector, exemplifying how transnational networks enhance development beyond remittance flows (Saxenian, 2006). Political transnationalism is evident in migrants influencing policies back home through lobbying, advocacy, and dual citizenship (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

Dual Labour Market Theory

The Dual Labour Market Theory, developed by Piore (1979), explains labor market segmentation by dividing it into two distinct sectors: the primary sector, characterized by stable, well-paid jobs with career advancement opportunities, and the secondary sector, which consists of low-wage, precarious employment with limited mobility. This theory is particularly relevant to migration and development, as it highlights the structural demand for migrant labor in developed economies. Due to demographic shifts, labor shortages, and native workers' reluctance to take low-status jobs, developed countries rely on migrant workers to fill secondary-sector roles in industries such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work (Massey *et al.*, 1993). These jobs, though essential, often offer little job security, poor working conditions, and exploitative wages, reinforcing migrants' economic vulnerability (Harris and Todaro, 1970). From a development perspective, remittances sent by migrants contribute significantly to the economies of their home countries, reducing poverty and fostering investment (de Haas, 2010). However, reliance on precarious migrant labor without pathways to upward mobility perpetuates economic inequalities, both within host countries and transnationally (Portes, 1995). Thus, while migration under the dual labor market framework supports economic development through labor supply and remittances, it also raises critical concerns about labor rights and integration.

These theoretical frameworks provide diverse perspectives on the migration-development nexus. While modernization theory views migration as a driver of progress, dependency and world-systems theories highlight how it reinforces inequalities. NELM offers a micro-level understanding of migration's economic role, and transnationalism captures the fluid and interconnected nature of migration in a globalized world. Table 1 encapsulates each theory's core ideas, contributors, implications, and examples for clarity in understanding their role in migration and development debates.

Table 1. Core ideas of each theory

Theory	Main Concept	Key Proponents / Developers	Implications for Migration and Development	Examples
Modernization Theory	Views migration as a process of societal progress and economic development.	Rostow (1960), Todaro (1976)	Migration facilitates modernization through remittances, urbanization, and infrastructure.	South Korea's labor migration during industrialization.
Dependency Theory	Argues migration reinforces global inequalities and dependence of the Global South on the Global North.	Frank (1967), Rodríguez (2017)	Skilled migration causes brain drain; remittances do not offset structural disadvantages.	Healthcare worker migration from Africa to Europe/North America.
World-Systems Theory	Migration driven by capitalist expansion; perpetuates global hierarchies.	Wallerstein (1974), Parreñas (2015)	Peripheral countries supply cheap labor; benefits flow mainly to core economies.	Southeast Asian domestic workers in Gulf states.
(NELM)	Migration is a household strategy to reduce risk and diversify income.	Stark and Bloom (1985), Taylor (1999)	Remittances serve as social insurance; broadens understanding beyond individual choices.	Families in Mexico sending members to the US for income security.
Transnationalism	Emphasizes migrants' ongoing engagement across borders, fostering linkages.	Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011)	Encourages social, political, and economic ties that challenge binary development models.	Transnational communities maintaining economic and social links across countries.

Source: Compiled by authors, 2025

Migration, Development, and Policy Implications

Given the diverse theoretical perspectives on migration and development, policy approaches have varied significantly. Some policies promote labor migration as a tool for economic growth, while others seek to curb migration through restrictive measures. The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize migration's potential to

contribute to inclusive development (United Nations, 2018). However, challenges remain in ensuring that migration policies align with development goals without exacerbating inequalities. Migration has played a significant role in shaping economic and social development in South Asian countries. The region, encompassing countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, has historically been a major source of international migrants, particularly to the Gulf states, Europe, and North America. The migration-development nexus in South Asia can be understood through various theoretical lenses, including Modernization Theory, Dependency Theory, World-Systems Theory, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), and Transnationalism (Barbora, Thieme, Siegmann, Menon, and Gurung, 2008). This section examines key examples from South Asia that illustrate these theoretical intersections and their policy implications.

Remittances and Development

The Case of Bangladesh and Nepal (NELM and Modernization Theory)

Remittances are a crucial driver of economic development in South Asia, aligning with both the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) and Modernization Theory. Bangladesh and Nepal provide compelling examples of how remittances contribute to household welfare, poverty reduction, and overall economic stability.

Bangladesh, one of the world's largest labor-exporting countries, received approximately \$22 billion in remittances in 2022, accounting for a significant share of its GDP (World Bank, 2022). According to NELM, migration decisions are often collective household strategies aimed at diversifying income sources and reducing economic risks (Stark and Bloom, 1985). Many Bangladeshi migrants, particularly those in the Gulf states, send remittances that fund education, healthcare, and small business investments in their home communities (Rahman and Kabir, 2020). This aligns with Modernization Theory, which views migration as a pathway to economic progress and improved living standards (Todaro, 1976; Ullah, 2010). However, reliance on remittances also exposes the country to vulnerabilities, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when migrant job losses led to reduced remittance flows and economic distress.

Nepal, where remittances constitute nearly 24% of GDP, has seen significant development in rural areas due to migration (World Bank, 2022). Migrants, primarily working in Malaysia, India, and the Middle East, remit earnings that support agricultural modernization, infrastructure improvements, and human capital investments (Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung, 2002). However, critics argue that while remittances alleviate short-term poverty, they do not necessarily lead to long-term structural change, raising concerns from a Dependency Theory perspective (Frank, 1967).

The Case of India (Dependency and World-Systems Theory)

India has one of the largest and most globally dispersed skilled migrant populations, particularly in fields such as information technology, medicine, and engineering (George, 2023). While migration has contributed to individual and family prosperity, it has also led to a "brain drain" of highly skilled professionals, a phenomenon that aligns with Dependency and World-Systems Theory.

For instance, Indian doctors and engineers have historically migrated to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom in search of better career opportunities, often due to inadequate infrastructure and lower wages at home (Khadria, 2010). From a Dependency Theory perspective, this pattern reflects the unequal global economic system where the Global South (India) supplies intellectual and professional labor to the Global North (Frank, 1967). The migration of medical professionals has particularly impacted India's healthcare sector, leading to shortages in rural areas where doctors are in high demand.

World-Systems Theory further explains this phenomenon by emphasizing how core economies (e.g., the U.S. and UK) extract labor from peripheral economies (e.g., India), maintaining economic disparities (Wallerstein, 1974). However, in recent years, India has leveraged its skilled diaspora to drive technological and economic growth, particularly in its booming IT sector. Cities like Bengaluru have become global hubs for software development, partly due to return migration and transnational knowledge transfer (Saxenian, 2006). This demonstrates how migration can also create "brain circulation" rather than permanent brain drain, challenging the rigid assumptions of Dependency Theory.

Sri Lankan and Bangladesh (World-Systems and Transnationalism Theories)

Female labor migration, particularly in domestic work, is a critical issue in South Asia. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are two major exporters of female domestic workers to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This migration pattern aligns with World-Systems Theory, as it highlights the global labor hierarchy where women from the periphery perform low-wage, precarious labor in the core economies (Parreñas, 2015).

The migration of Sri Lankan domestic workers to countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE reflects a broader pattern of labor migration driven by economic necessity and structural inequalities in the global labor market. These workers, primarily women, play a crucial role in Sri Lanka's economy through remittances, which constitute a significant portion of the country's foreign exchange earnings (Jureidini, 2017). Remittances contribute to household income, education, healthcare, and poverty reduction, making migration a vital economic strategy for many families. However, the economic benefits of remittances often come at a high human cost, as many Sri Lankan domestic workers experience exploitative working conditions, including long hours, withheld wages, physical and psychological abuse, and lack of legal protection under the Kafala sponsorship system prevalent in many Gulf countries (Fernandez, 2018).

From a migration and development perspective, this dynamic illustrates a paradox: while remittances contribute to national development, they also reinforce dependency on low-wage labor migration, leaving the home country vulnerable to global economic fluctuations (Weeraratne, 2020). Moreover, the Sri Lankan government faces a dilemma—it seeks to maximize the economic benefits of labor migration while grappling with the inability to enforce labor protections for its citizens abroad. International labor agreements and bilateral treaties have attempted to improve migrant worker protections, but enforcement remains weak, particularly in host countries where domestic work is excluded from labor laws (ILO, 2017). This underscores the need for stronger labor rights frameworks, international cooperation, and reintegration policies that reduce dependence on low-skilled migration as a development strategy, instead fostering domestic economic opportunities and skills development in Sri Lanka.

Bangladeshi women employed as domestic workers in the Middle East face significant vulnerabilities, including restrictive sponsorship (Kafala) systems that limit their rights (Rahman, 2011). From a Transnationalism perspective, these women maintain economic and social ties with their families in Bangladesh, regularly sending remittances and influencing local economies (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). However, transnational engagement does not necessarily translate into empowerment, as many women migrants remain in low-status jobs with little opportunity for upward mobility.

The Case of Pakistan and India

Migration policies in South Asia have historically been shaped by geopolitical tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan. The lack of comprehensive regional migration governance has exacerbated irregular migration, labor exploitation, and border conflicts (Wickramasekara, 2011). For example, despite their shared history, India and Pakistan impose strict visa restrictions, limiting cross-border labor mobility that could otherwise contribute to regional economic development.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) initiatives on migration remains underdeveloped, with countries prioritizing bilateral agreements over regional frameworks. A more integrated regional migration policy could facilitate labor mobility, skills transfer, and economic cooperation, aligning with Transnationalism by promoting sustained migrant linkages across borders.

The migration-development nexus in South Asia illustrates complex interactions between economic growth, labor mobility, and structural inequalities. While theories like NELM and Modernization Theory highlight migration's positive economic impact, Dependency and World-Systems Theory underscore the exploitative dynamics of global labor markets. Transnationalism, meanwhile, offers a perspective on how migrants actively shape both origin and destination economies.

The India–Pakistan migration dynamic is not only historically charged but also uniquely illustrative of how migration intersects with both geopolitical conflict and development constraints in South Asia. Despite cultural affinities, familial ties, and shared colonial legacies, migration between the two nations is heavily restricted and often framed through the lens of national security, resulting in limited labor mobility and stifled economic interdependence. This section analyzes the India–Pakistan case through Dependency Theory, Transnationalism, and Political Economy frameworks.

Historical Trajectories and Developmental Disjunctures

The 1947 Partition of British India created one of the largest mass migrations in history, with approximately 15 million people displaced across the newly drawn borders. This initial movement had lasting implications on identity, citizenship regimes, and development priorities in both countries. While India embarked on a mixed economy with early industrialization, Pakistan focused heavily on security and centralized development planning. Migration across the border since then has been sporadic and largely irregular, with visa regimes reflecting mutual distrust. From a Dependency Theory perspective, both countries have been trapped in cycles of underdevelopment exacerbated by military expenditures and restricted regional integration. While

labor migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been central to both economies, bilateral labor mobility remains underutilized. Pakistan's reliance on remittances from the Middle East (accounting for over 8.1% of GDP in 2023) mirrors India's broader remittance economy (\$125 billion in 2023), yet there is no institutional framework facilitating labor flows between the two. Dependency theorists would argue that external labor markets (e.g., the GCC, UK, and North America) serve as more significant drivers of development than regional cooperation, reinforcing dependency on the Global North rather than fostering South-South solidarity.

Transnationalism and Suppressed Networks

Despite hostile political relations, transnational linkages between Indian and Pakistani migrants in the Gulf and North America persist. Diasporic communities often maintain informal social, business, and even charitable connections that defy the diplomatic freeze between the two states. Indian and Pakistani migrants in the UK, for instance, frequently collaborate through cultural festivals, business ventures, and intermarriages, indicating the power of transnationalism to sustain cross-border ties. However, these linkages are rarely translated into formal regional development strategies or trade frameworks. The absence of labor mobility agreements and stalled SAARC initiatives demonstrate how state-level politics suppress the developmental potential of transnational networks.

Policy Constraints and the Security-Development Trade-Off

The securitization of migration—where cross-border mobility is viewed through the prism of terrorism, espionage, or religious radicalization—has constrained regional development in the subcontinent. Migration policy is dictated more by military establishments and intelligence agencies than by labor or development ministries. This undermines broader aspirations for regional economic cooperation, trade, and social integration. The Political Economy of migration here reveals how national identity narratives and geopolitical calculations inhibit migration's developmental potential. Instead of fostering integrated labor markets or joint skill development programs, both India and Pakistan focus on hard borders and mutually exclusive economic policies.

The India-Pakistan case exemplifies how historical grievances and nationalist ideologies can stifle the developmental dividends of migration. While both nations have thriving diasporas and large remittance-dependent populations, their bilateral migration is negligible. The regional frameworks under SAARC remain dormant, failing to harness migration as a tool for development or peacebuilding. For a more inclusive and effective migration-development nexus, there is a pressing need to delink mobility from security narratives and develop people-centered migration frameworks that enable skill sharing, remittance flows, and circular migration across the India-Pakistan corridor.

Discussion

This article attempted to examine the theoretical intersections between migration and development, demonstrating that migration is neither a straightforward pathway to economic growth nor an inherently exploitative process. Instead, migration exists within a complex web of economic, social, and political structures that shape its impacts on development. By engaging

with multiple theoretical frameworks—Modernization Theory, Dependency Theory, World-Systems Theory, The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), Dual labour market theory and Transnationalism—this analysis has highlighted both the opportunities and challenges embedded in migration as a development strategy.

In an era of globalization, migration remains a key driver of economic interdependence and social transformation. Remittances from migrants continue to contribute significantly to the economies of developing nations, particularly in South Asia, where they fund education, healthcare, and infrastructure. However, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, heavy reliance on remittances exposes migrant-sending countries to economic vulnerabilities when global mobility is disrupted. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment, tightening migration policies, and geopolitical tensions complicate the mobility of labor and the realization of developmental potential of migration. The critical perspectives explored in this paper emphasize that while migration can facilitate economic growth, it needs to be accompanied by policies that ensure fair labor conditions, social protection, and investment in domestic economic resilience.

South Asia exemplifies the migration-development nexus in its most dynamic form. Countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka heavily rely on remittances, while India serves both as a major migrant-sending and receiving country. The theoretical perspectives analyzed in this article illustrate how migration influences South Asian economies in varying ways. Modernization Theory aligns with the success stories of skilled migration, particularly in India's IT sector, where transnational knowledge flows have fostered economic growth. However, Dependency and World-Systems Theory offer a more critical view of migration's impact, particularly in the context of low-wage labor migration to the Gulf states, where migrants often experience exploitation under restrictive labor regimes. Policy reforms, including stronger regional cooperation through SAARC and better protection for migrant workers, are essential to harness migration's benefits while mitigating its risks.

This article contributes to migration and development scholarship by integrating diverse theoretical perspectives and applying them to real-world migration patterns, particularly in South Asia. While much of the literature on migration and development remains polarized—either portraying migration as a solution to underdevelopment or as a mechanism of economic exploitation—this analysis underscores the need for a more balanced understanding. The inclusion of transnationalism and NELM within the broader debate also highlights the agency of migrants, moving beyond state-centered and structuralist explanations of migration's role in development.

The article highlights that understanding the multifaceted theoretical frameworks of migration—such as modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, NELM, and transnationalism—can inform policies that better harness migration's benefits. By critically assessing these theories and their empirical implications, policymakers can design strategies that promote skill development, equitable remittance flows, and stronger migrant rights, thereby amplifying the positive impacts on both origin and destination countries. For instance, fostering regional cooperation through frameworks like SAARC can facilitate labour mobility and knowledge exchange. Strengthening labour rights and social protections reduces vulnerabilities for migrants and encourages their active engagement in development processes, thus realizing

migration as a sustainable and beneficial force. Overall, these results contribute to a nuanced understanding that, with balanced policies grounded in theory and empirical evidence, migration can serve as a catalyst for inclusive growth and social development in both sending and receiving regions.

One of the key contributions of this paper is its critical evaluation of theoretical frameworks in light of contemporary migration trends. The discussion extends beyond traditional economic analyses and incorporates social and political dimensions, such as gendered labor migration and transnational engagements. Future research could explore the evolving role of digital technology and the gig economy in migration, particularly how remote work opportunities might alter traditional labor migration patterns.

The theoretical frameworks explored in this paper—modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), and transnationalism—each provide valuable, though partial, lenses through which the migration-development nexus can be understood. Their varying assumptions, epistemological orientations, and analytical strengths invite both critique and refinement, especially when viewed in light of contemporary global migration dynamics.

Modernization theory is overly optimistic in assuming a linear trajectory of development spurred by migration and remittances. While this may hold in cases like South Korea or India's IT sector, it neglects structural inequalities and uneven access to global labor markets. Its nation-centric orientation also underplays the role of transnational actors and global capital. Dependency theory and world-systems theory offer important correctives, emphasizing global asymmetries, structural dependency, and labor exploitation. However, they often portray migrants as passive victims of larger systems, overlooking migrant agency and resilience. These theories also struggle to account for positive development feedback loops generated through migrant entrepreneurship, return migration, or diasporic investments, which are now empirically evident.

The NELM model, while strong in capturing household decision-making and remittance behaviors, has limitations in explaining macroeconomic outcomes or political constraints. It also tends to decontextualize migration decisions from broader structural drivers such as state policy, international trade, or war.

Transnationalism provides a powerful conceptual update, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how migrants sustain bi-local lives, shape development back home, and influence social and political change. Nevertheless, it under-theorizes class, gender, and the legal constraints that condition migrant agency, and it often assumes a level of connectivity not available to all migrants, especially the undocumented and the poor.

These theories, when applied in combination rather than in isolation, enrich our understanding of migration-development linkages. For instance, the NELM framework is particularly useful for analyzing rural household strategies in Nepal or Bangladesh, while transnationalism provides insight into the diasporic engagement of Indian tech professionals or Pakistani NGOs abroad. Dependency and world-systems theories, meanwhile, help illuminate the political economy of labor migration from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to the Gulf under exploitative regimes.

Using these theories as diagnostic tools, researchers and policymakers can better anticipate development bottlenecks and target interventions. For example, return migration programs might

be more effective if coupled with diaspora engagement policies (transnationalism) and social protection schemes (NELM), while gender-sensitive migration laws should consider the systemic vulnerabilities highlighted by world-systems analysis.

The main implication of this theoretical synthesis is that migration must be embedded in a multidimensional development policy that includes labor rights, social protection, skill portability, and regional governance. Policymakers should move beyond simplistic remittance-based metrics and develop indicators that account for long-term developmental contributions, such as community investment, innovation, and political participation. There is also a need for regional cooperation frameworks that promote circular migration, knowledge transfer, and inclusive governance. In South Asia, revitalizing SAARC's migration agenda, creating India–Pakistan labor corridors, and ensuring ethical recruitment in the GCC could significantly improve migration outcomes. For scholars, future research should integrate digital migration, climate mobility, and gendered labor experiences into existing theories. Empirical work that centers migrant voices and tracks longitudinal impacts across generations will offer more grounded insights into the migration-development nexus.

Conclusion

The migration-development nexus is far from a linear or unidirectional relationship. As this article has demonstrated, understanding this intersection demands a multifaceted theoretical engagement that goes beyond conventional binaries of success and failure, opportunity and exploitation, or gain and loss. Migration is simultaneously a symptom and a catalyst of development—it reflects underlying inequalities in global political economy while also providing pathways for economic, social, and human capital transformation. This paradox lies at the heart of the theoretical debates explored in this paper.

By bringing together five major theoretical approaches—modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems theory, the new economics of labor migration (NELM), and transnationalism—alongside dual labor market theory, this article provides a robust analytical framework for interpreting contemporary migration trends. While modernization theory celebrates migration as an engine of growth and remittance-led development, dependency and world-systems theories critically underscore the enduring power asymmetries and structural exploitation embedded in global labor flows. NELM adds nuance by revealing how migration decisions are shaped by family-level strategies to mitigate risk, and transnationalism reframes migrants not as passive economic agents but as active social actors maintaining enduring ties across borders. Together, these frameworks reveal that migration's developmental consequences are deeply shaped by who migrates, where they go, under what conditions, and how states and institutions mediate their experiences.

The empirical examples drawn from South Asia—spanning skilled migration in India, labor outflows from Bangladesh and Nepal, and the gendered experiences of Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi domestic workers—illustrate the applicability of these theories. The region exemplifies both the potential and pitfalls of migration-driven development. On one hand, remittances have alleviated poverty, funded education, and contributed to macroeconomic stability. On the other, dependence on precarious labor exports exposes these economies to

volatility and entrenches socio-economic vulnerability. Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of migration—especially in domestic and care work—highlight critical gaps in protections, dignity, and recognition for migrant labor.

This article contributes to contemporary scholarship by advocating for a more integrative and empirically grounded understanding of migration and development. It cautions against adopting any singular theoretical lens and instead calls for a composite approach that is attentive to both structure and agency, global systems and local contexts. Importantly, it stresses that migrant voices and experiences must be central to this analysis—reminding us that migration is not merely about economics and policy, but about human aspiration, resilience, and rights.

For policymakers, the key takeaway is the need for migration governance frameworks that are both development-oriented and rights-based. National and regional policies—especially in the Global South—must move beyond remittance maximization toward comprehensive strategies that ensure labor rights, social protections, and long-term reintegration opportunities. Regional platforms like SAARC remain underutilized in this regard. In an era of global crises—from pandemics to climate change—migration must be understood not just as a challenge to be managed, but as a transformative force with the capacity to reshape development trajectories if governed ethically and inclusively. This paper affirms that theorizing migration and development is not merely an academic exercise—it is a necessary step toward crafting humane, effective, and future-oriented migration policies that can harness mobility for collective wellbeing.

References

- Barbora, S., Thieme, S., Siegmann, K. A., Menon, V., and Gurung, G. (2008). Migration Matters in South Asia: Commonalities and Critiques. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(24), 57–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277567>
- Chattoraj, D. (2024). International relations versus international migration: complements or substitutes?. In *Governance, migration and security in international relations* (pp. 33–48). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Chattoraj, D. (2020). [Review of the book *The migration myth in policy and practice: Dreams, development and despair*, by A. A. Ullah and M. S. Haque]. *Migration Letters*, 17(3), 473–475.
- Clemens, M. A. (2007). Do visas kill? Health effects of African health professional emigration. *Center for Global Development Working Paper*, (114).
- de Haas, H. (2010). Migration and development: A theoretical perspective. *International Migration Review*, 44(1), 227–264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2009.00804.x>
- De Haas, H. (2012). The migration and development pendulum: A critical view on research and policy. *International Migration*, 50(3), 8–25.
- de Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework. *CMS* 9, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>
- Faist, T. (2008). Migrants as transnational development agents: An inquiry into the newest round of the migration–development nexus. *Population, Space and Place*, 14(1), 21–42. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.471>

- Faist, T. (2010). Transnationalization and development: Toward an alternative agenda. *Social Analysis*, 54(3), 38–59.
- Fernandez, B. (2018). *Migrant domestic workers in the Middle East: The home and the world*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frank, A. G. (1967). *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical studies of Chile and Brazil*. Monthly Review Press.
- George, A. S. (2023). Brain drain or brain gain: Assessing the costs and benefits of India's manpower exports. *Partners Universal International Innovation Journal (PUIJ)*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10257669>
- Glick Schiller, N., Basch, L., and Blanc-Szanton, C. (1995). From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68(1), 48–63.
- Harris, J. R., and Todaro, M. P. (1970). Migration, unemployment and development: A two-sector analysis. *American Economic Review*, 60(1), 126–142.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2017). *Promoting fair migration policies for domestic workers*. ILO.
- Jureidini, R. (2017). Irregular migration and domestic workers in the Middle East. *International Migration*, 55(2), 189–203. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12345>
- Khadria, B. (2010). The future of international migration to OECD countries: India and the case for a development-friendly migration policy. *OECD Publishing*.
- King, R., and Collyer, M. (2016). Migration and Development Framework and Its Links to Integration. In: Garcés-Masareñas, B., Penninx, R. (eds) *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe*. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21674-4_10
- Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. University of California Press.
- Levitt, P., and Lamba-Nieves, D. (2011). Social remittances revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2011.521361>
- Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., and Taylor, J. E. (1993). Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431–466. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462>
- Parreñas, R. S. (2015). *Servants of globalization: Migration and domestic work* (2nd ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Piore, M. J. (1979). *Birds of passage: Migrant labor and industrial societies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Portes, A. (1995). Economic sociology and the sociology of immigration: A conceptual overview. In A. Portes (Ed.), *The economic sociology of immigration: Essays on networks, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship* (pp. 1–41). Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, A., and Walton, J. (1981). *Labor, class, and the international system*. Academic Press.
- Rahman, M. M. (2011). Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in the UAE: Gender-Differentiated Patterns of Migration Experiences. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 47(2), 395–411. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23054305>

- Rahman, M., and Kabir, A. (2020). Migration, remittances and economic development in Bangladesh. *Journal of Development Studies*, 56(5), 878–895.
- Rodríguez, C. (2017). Dependency, migration, and development in Latin America: Critical perspectives. *Latin American Perspectives*, 44(3), 4–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X16683324>
- Rostow, W. W. (1960). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. Cambridge University Press.
- Saxenian, A. (2006). *The new Argonauts: Regional advantage in a global economy*. Harvard University Press.
- Seddon, D., Adhikari, J., and Gurung, G. (2002). Foreign labor migration and the remittance economy of Nepal. *Critical Asian Studies*, 34(1), 19–40.
- Stark, O., and Bloom, D. E. (1985). The new economics of labor migration. *American Economic Review*, 75(2), 173–178.
- Taylor, J. E. (1999). The new economics of labour migration and the role of remittances in the migration process. *International Migration*, 37(1), 63–88.
- Todaro, M. P. (1976). *Internal migration in developing countries: A review of theory, evidence, methodology and research priorities*. International Labour Organization.
- Ullah A.K.M.A., and Shahidul Haque. (2020). *The Migration Myth in Policy and Practice: Development, Dream and Despair*. The Netherlands/Singapore: Springer Nature.
- Ullah A.K.M.A. (2010) (First edition). *Rationalizing Migration Decisions: Labour Migrants in South and South-East Asia*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- United Nations.(2018). *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195
- Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The modern world-system*. New York: Academic Press.
- Weeraratne, B. (2020). *Migration and remittances in Sri Lanka: Trends, patterns, and policy implications*. Institute of Policy Studies.
- World Bank.(2022). *Migration and remittances factbook*. Washington: World Bank.