



**SID**

Society for International Development

**SID-NL Lecture Series 2010-2011**

**“Global Values in a Changing World”**

Synergy of State and Society in a Globalized World

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Eighth lecture: **Migration and Development: Policy Potentials and Policy Illusions**

Speaker: **Hein de Haas**, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford

Moderator: Heidi Dahles, VU University

On Monday the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, Hein de Haas, Senior Research Fellow at the International Migration Institute of the University of Oxford, delivered the eighth lecture in the 2010-2011 SID-NL Lecture Series, ‘Global Values in a Changing World’.

### **Summary**

Hein de Haas spoke of the ‘deep fears and high hopes’ that run through the migration and development debate. Views on migration have oscillated between ‘brain gain’ optimism in the early post-WWII years to ‘brain gain’ pessimism in the 1970s and 80s, to more positive views again over the last decade. According to De Haas, these shifts are more ideologically driven than empirically derived. This serves as a cautionary note to anyone seeking to identify migration as the lynchpin in development. Development is after all the responsibility of states not of migrants.

In the last decade, migration has become something of a new development mantra, in large part thanks to the massive increase in remittance flows over the past 15 years. Remittances to low and middle income countries now total approximately US\$243 billion per annum, a figure considerably higher than the amount given in overseas development assistance. Furthermore, in comparison to foreign direct investment, remittance flows are less volatile and have even proven to have counter-cyclical effects. Could migration then indeed be the new development panacea?

The answers to this question have varied over time. De Haas documented the various historical episodes in which both positive and negative views on migration have come to the fore. In the 1950s and 60s, migration was seen as beneficial to development. Inspired by modernisation and neoclassical theory, migration was understood as part of the efficient allocation of production factors. Over time, we would hereby see a trend towards convergence between developing and developed countries as migration produced positive sum outcomes. This optimism was punctured in the 1970s with the rise of neo-Marxist



dependency theories. These postulated that migration, far from contributing to development, actually undermined development since it represented a net South-North transfer of skills and resources – a ‘brain drain’ rather than a ‘brain gain’. Instead of convergence, we can expect increasing divergence between developing and developed countries. A final turn in the migration and development debate has taken place since the year 2000 with the ‘discovery’ of remittances. Migration is now firmly back on the development agenda.

De Haas posed the question of whether these changes in the migration and development debate reflect: i) genuine changes in the impact of migration on development; ii) improved methodology and data analysis instruments or iii) a paradigm shift. Personally De Haas was extremely sceptical that the impact of migration on development could change so drastically in such short periods of time and believed these shifts were more likely the result of the second and third factors. Improved investigative tools have allowed for a more nuanced



analysis of the impact of migration on development. Moving beyond the dichotomy of brain gain or brain drain, a more complex and heterogeneous picture emerges on the relationship between migration and development. Studies have shown that migration does contribute to poverty alleviation and can boost regional economic development. Inequality though may increase, at least in the short term, as a result of migration.

The shifts in the migration and development debate are however also discursive. As was mentioned, earlier turns in the migration and development debate were influenced by changes in dominant social theories, from neoclassical to neo-Marxist. In a similar fashion, the recent optimism surrounding migration and remittances fits very well within a neo-liberal policy

discourse. It exemplifies a type of self-help, ‘third way’, communitarian approach to development which accords with the model of the Washington Consensus.

De Haas detected in this ideological framing of the migration/development nexus, a danger of ‘naïve optimism’ whereby migrants are somehow expected to be able to overcome structural barriers to development. This distracts from the fact that it is the responsibility of states to create conditions that are conducive towards development. So far, governments have instituted “targeted” policies to realise the development potential of migration such as facilitating remittances and policies to engage migrants in development processes. De Haas believed that these policies can only have a marginal impact. More general economic and political policies which would create favourable development conditions, along with less restrictive entry requirements for lower skilled migrants, would have a much greater effect. De Haas reminded the audience that only 3% of the world’s population are international migrants. We should therefore not place too much emphasis on migration at the expense of a critical focus on the role of nation-states in development.

Following on from De Haas’ lecture, **Heidi Dahles** of the VU University in Amsterdam, offered some remarks based on her own research on return migration. She noted that return migrants do play a constructive role in development as they are shown to be more entrepreneurial and more likely to start a business upon their return to their countries of

origin. This however was also in large part dependent on the migration and return policies of the countries of origin in creating conducive conditions for investment. Receiving countries also have a role to play in helping people to return with skills by for instance providing entrepreneurial training and education. Hein de Haas agreed with many of these points and argued that the creation of more liberal policy regimes for migration would greatly encourage circular migration. The paradox is that the more restrictive the migration policy is, the more likely the effect will be to fix migrants into permanent settlement. On Dahles' second point, he questioned why training should be linked to return migration. This could prove politically dangerous since it might undercut public support for development programmes. In this sense, the linking of the migration and development debate is problematic.

The floor was then opened to the audience to ask questions. One of the audience members picked up on De Haas' statement that even though remittance flows have surged in recent years, we cannot expect too much of migration in terms of development. What hopes can we then hold out for overseas development assistance (ODA), whose magnitude is many times smaller than remittance flows? De Haas responded that ODA and remittances are two very different entities. While ODA is channelled through big organizations which may have the capability to effect macro-economic decision making, the overwhelming majority of remittances are channelled through families and individuals. We should therefore not conflate the two things.



Another person wished to know if there are any differences between South-South migration versus South-North migration in terms of their impact on development. De Haas commented that there is still a lack of data in order to specify what the differences are. Some examples of interesting avenues to explore would be the differential impact of migration on fertility for instance or the relationship between migration and political change. In North Africa for example, emigrant communities have played an important role in stimulating and pushing for political reform. Further research in these areas could provide interesting results. Finally, a number of questions arose regarding the concept of 'global citizenship' versus the categorization of someone as a 'migrant'. De Haas stated that the notion of global citizenship tends to be a somewhat elite view, as lower skilled people face much more obstacles in migrating. We should therefore also consider factoring in a global class perspective into the debate on migration and development.

