Post-2015: Can we talk about migration?

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1 Introduction

'Migration is the oldest action against poverty. (...) What is the perversity in the human soul that causes people to resist so obvious a good?'

Galbraith (1979)

As the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) deadline of 2015 approaches, discussions about what could replace them are gathering pace. There is no shortage of proposals on how the goals could be improved to reflect development challenges that were not as salient in the early 2000s. For example, there have been suggestions to place a stronger emphasis on growth, employment, equity, political accountability, security, environmental sustainability, and resilience – to name a few (Melamed, 2012).

Migration did not feature in the MDGs. MDG 8 aimed to develop a global partnership on key policy areas, which would be instrumental to achieve Goals 1 to 7. It included issues related to trade, debt relief, aid and knowledge transfer, but migration was not mentioned. Should migration feature in the debates about a future global agreement on development this time round? Despite the obvious political sensitivities, issues that go beyond the traditional development cooperation agenda – such as migration – deserve to be brought to the table.

Many have argued that (labour) migration can be an important tool to reduce poverty (Clemens and Pritchett, 2008; Galbraith, 1979).[1] A recent review of empirical estimates suggests that the free movement of people across borders can generate overall economic gains ranging between 50 per cent and 150 per cent of world GDP (Clemens, 2011). Furthermore, studies looking at the distribution of these gains suggest that they can have a strong poverty-reduction effect – by increasing labour earnings of migrants, as well as through the impact of remittances on source countries (Fernandez-Huertas and Rapoport, 2011). At the same time, immigrants can play an important role in filling labour shortages and thus contribute to a more dynamic host economy.

Despite this increasing evidence, migration is rarely seen as a development issue, and in practice, labour mobility remains heavily restricted. There are both economic and non-economic reasons that help explain why this is the case.

Although there is some agreement that increasing labour mobility would generate net overall benefits, there can also be redistribution effects and (short-term) costs. These will ultimately depend on the characteristics of migrants and labour market conditions in both sending and receiving countries (Skeldon, 2003). For instance, workers in receiving countries fear that increased competition from unskilled migrant workers may lead to lower wages or even unemployment. Although the evidence suggests that these effects are either absent or small – especially when compared to the magnitude of the gains (UNDP, 2009) – they matter to those groups affected and by extension to politicians. In some cases, governments may need to implement supporting policy measures to minimise potential transitory negative effects.

In addition, some have questioned the extent to which the poorest households can actually benefit from greater labour mobility. Migrating often requires significant financial resources (e.g., to cover transport and settling costs) and social networks, which might not be available to all strata of society. Consequently, migrants and remittances may not be necessarily linked to the poorest households and regions.

[1] Note that the paper focuses on international labour migration.

There are also concerns related to social cohesion, national security, and public services capacity. Even if these issues in most cases lack a strong empirical grounding, politicians in receiving countries tend to be overwhelmingly cautious – largely due to voters' negative perceptions of migration.[2] Moreover, politicians in source countries may be concerned about 'brain drain', although the evidence appears to be mixed. Therefore, it could be argued that those interested and (directly) benefiting from migration are left with no clear advocates.

However, some of these views may change when confronted with strong exogenous pressures. The most obvious will come from ageing populations in developed and some emerging economies – a migration 'pull' factor. This will lead to increasing demand for young workers as these economies face labour shortages and the associated negative economic consequences (e.g. fiscal imbalances) that could severely impact living standards.

Other factors could also contribute to changing current perceptions of migration, but their influence is likely to be weaker than that exerted by demographic pressures. Migration related to natural disasters and conflicts – i.e., migration 'push' factors – may force global actors to reconsider their approach to migration. In addition, the case for greater international labour mobility could be much better articulated – partly by highlighting the existing evidence on the benefits for both receiving and source countries, and by working more closely with Diasporas.

In this paper, we discuss international migration in the context of the post-2015 debate. While recognising that internal migration is also highly relevant, we focus on the international dimension in order to narrow the scope of this paper.

Our main objective is to consider if and how international labour migration could be adequately incorporated in a future global development framework. For instance, the role of labour migration as an additional tool to reduce global poverty (and demographic deficits) could be mentioned in a general narrative or statement on the goals, in a strengthened MDG 8, or in national 'roadmaps' to achieve the goals.

With only three years remaining, expectations on what could be effectively achieved on this agenda are fairly modest, particularly taking into account the dangers of overloading an already complex process. That said, at this stage it is important to be ambitious, since the political process will eventually narrow down the scope of the issues to be addressed. Ultimately, there is an intrinsic value in having discussions that contribute to raise awareness and improve the quality of the debate on the role of international migration in development.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews some of the pressures for increased labour mobility and outlines key migration trends. It also provides a brief overview of the empirical evidence on the impact of migration in source and destination countries. Section 3 describes the political economy of migration, and reflects on why it remains such a politically sensitive issue. Section 4 outlines existing policies and proposals on immigration policy. Section 5 concludes by reflecting on how migration could be integrated in a post-2015 development framework.

[2] Pritchett (2006) provides a comprehensive analysis of the constraints to increased labour mobility, arguing that these are shaped by several 'immovable ideas', including: (i) taking nationality as a morally legitimate basis for discrimination; (ii) thinking of 'development' exclusively in terms of nation-states (rather than nationals); (iii) assuming that increased migration of unskilled labour will lower wages (or take jobs away from natives) and worsen the distribution of income in the receiving countries; and (iv) assuming that migrants are a fiscal cost because they use more services than they pay in taxes.

2 Trends and Evidence

2.1 Pressures for increased labour mobility

Pritchett (2006) refers to a number of 'irresistible forces' that have amplified the pressure for increased labour mobility across countries. These include: differing demographic trends, especially with regard to the size of the working-age population; large wage differentials, particularly for unskilled workers; significant gains from increasing labour mobility compared to further liberalisation of trade and capital; and the rise of employment in low-skill (non-tradable) services, such as personal and health services. These seem to be further facilitated by declining transport and communication costs (Mayda, 2011).

In this section, we focus on demographic pressures and high global income inequality, since these are probably the most noticeable pressures for increased labour mobility.

An ageing population

The world population is rapidly ageing in both developed and developing countries. These increases in the 'median age' are mainly due to lower fertility rates and declining old-age mortality. Consequently, the old-age dependency ratio is projected to increase significantly over the next few decades – from 0.12 dependents in 2010 to 0.26 dependents by 2050. The situation is particularly dramatic in Europe, Japan and China. For example, the old-age dependency ratio in China is projected to increase from 0.11 in 2010 to 0.42 in 2050, whereas in Europe it is expected to grow from 0.24 in 2010 to 0.47 in 2050 (UNDESA, 2011a).

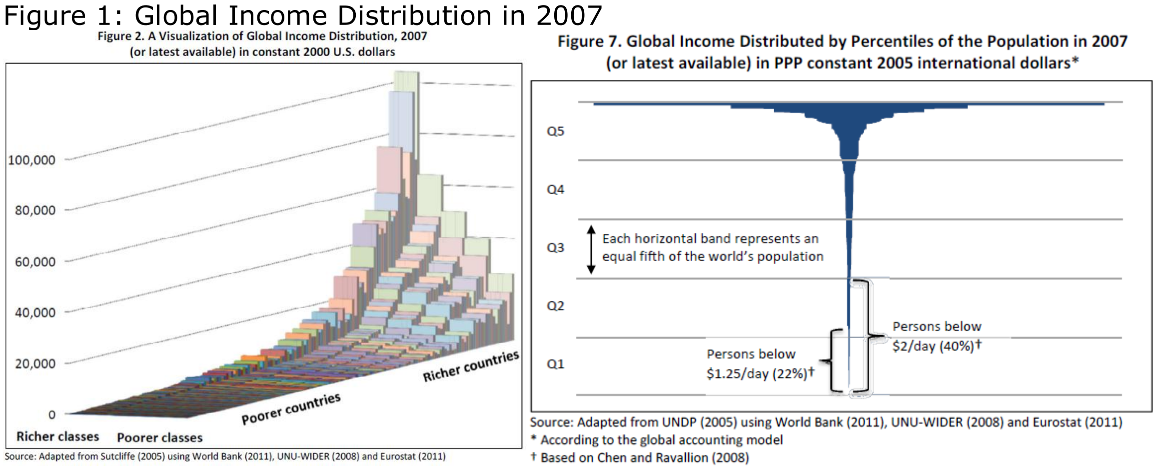
These demographic trends are particularly worrying when considering that ageing populations will increase the demand for health services and old-age pensions, reduce the tax base, and deteriorate current account balances – through its impact on national saving rates. Indeed, ageing is expected to intensify already noticeable pressures on fiscal and external balances in many developed countries. A natural policy option would be to increase the retirement age, in order to ease the increasing burden placed on the working-age population. However, this strategy is likely to face some political obstacles, while its success will ultimately depend on whether the elderly will be in sufficient good-health to work productively ('healthy life expectancy').

In this context, easing barriers to international migration appears to have the greatest potential to solve some of these structural deficits, especially by rejuvenating ageing populations in advanced and emerging economies. Indeed, there is likely to be a fierce global competition for young workers, especially once India and China reach their population peaks in the next few decades. Nonetheless, migration does raise issues related to social integration (and possibly urbanisation) that ought to be careful considered.

High global income inequality

The concept of global income inequality considers inequality among world citizens, regardless of national borders. Recent estimates suggest that about 9 per cent of the world population receives 50 per cent of global income, while the bottom-half of the population – i.e., the poorest 50 per cent – received about 7 per cent (Milanovic, 2011b). Figure 1 illustrates these disparities quite clearly. This is said to be the highest level of global inequality in human history.

Figure 1: Global Income Distribution in 2007



Source: Ortiz and Cummins (2011)

What is particularly interesting is that the main factor driving this inequality appears to have shifted from within-country to between-country differentials. Milanovic (2011b) argues that about 60 per cent of income dispersion is currently due to the country of citizenship, compared to less than 20 per cent for parental income class. This suggests that citizenship (in a context of restricted international migration) can be seen as an important 'rent'. Clemens and Pritchett (2008) also look at a similar issue. They estimate the average income of people born in the same country – i.e., 'income per natural', irrespective of where that person now resides – and compare this to the traditional measure of income per resident. Their results confirm that the (in some cases large) differences between the two indicators is largely explained by the effect of international migration (where you live) rather than 'selection' (what you know).

Given this evidence, the economic incentives to migrate are becoming stronger, and measures to stem migration are unlikely to be effective – but rather encourage irregular migration. In the absence of large global income redistribution mechanisms (e.g., public transfers across countries) or a faster catching-up by developing countries (i.e., convergence), a reduction in global inequality can only be achieved through greater international mobility of labour (Milanovic, 2011a).

2.2 Migration trends

Movement across borders remains fairly limited

Despite growing pressures for increased migration, labour mobility remains fairly restricted by current policies and low by historical standards.

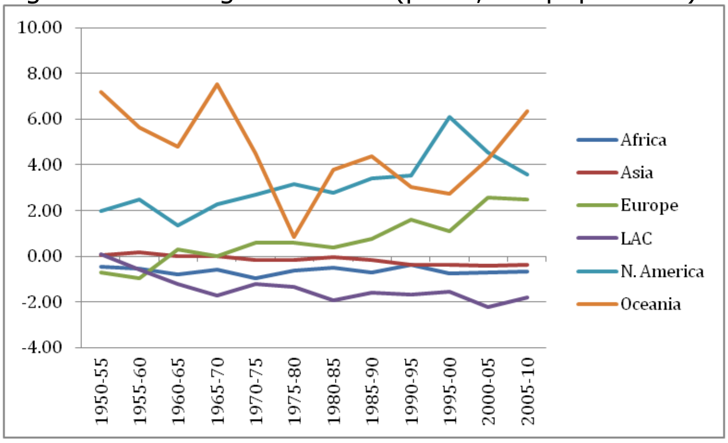
Historical trends tend to challenge the perception that we currently live in a period of very high migration. For instance, the late 19th century was a period of 'mass migration'. During the period from 1870 to 1910, the annual net migration rate was at 12 per thousand inhabitants in Argentina, 7 per thousand in Canada and Australia, and 4 per thousand in the US. In terms of emigration, the rate was 11 per thousand in Ireland, 9 per thousand in Italy, and between 2 and 5 per thousand for Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Great Britain (UNDESA, 2004). Hence, many countries have actually experienced higher (relative) migration flows in the late 19th century and early 20th century than those occurring today.[3] As a share of the world population, the 19th century was a period of higher international mobility than the 20th century (UNDP,

[3] Williamson (1998) suggests that mass migration during the late 19th century significantly contributed to the convergence of real wages across the Atlantic (i.e., between Europe and North America).

2009). For instance, almost 15 per cent of the US population was foreign born in 1910, while in 2000 this figure was just above 10 per cent (Mayda, 2011).

Migration flows slowed down significantly between 1914 and 1950, partly due to the two World Wars and the Great Depression. These events contributed to more restrictive immigration policies (Chiswick and Hatton, 2003). Since then, and coinciding with a period of strong economic progress, migration flows started to increase once again. Figure 2 shows that Europe became a net recipient of migrants in the 1960s, but that its rate remains fairly low – just above 2 per thousand inhabitants. It is possible that North America’s higher net migration rate is related to perceptions and policy stances that have been shaped by its history of immigration.

Figure 2: Net Migration Rate (per 1,000 population)



Source: UNDESA (2011a)

Moreover, labour mobility remains heavily restricted – especially when compared with the international movement of goods and capital. The current stock of international migrants is estimated to be at 214 million (as of 2010), which corresponds to only about 3 per cent of the world population (Table 1).

Table 1: Migration Flows

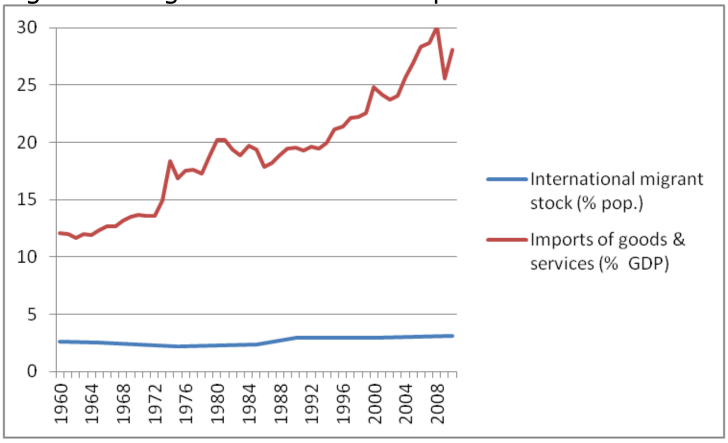
	Stock of Immigrants (billion)				Annual Growth (%)	Share of Population (%)		Emigration Rate (%)
	1960	1990	2005	2010p	1960-2005	1960	2005	2000-2002
Africa	9.2	16.0	17.7	19.2	1.7	3.2	1.9	2.9
Asia	28.5	50.9	55.1	61.3	0.7	1.7	1.4	1.7
Europe	17.5	49.4	64.3	69.7	2.9	3.0	8.8	7.3
LAC	6.2	7.1	6.9	7.5	0.2	2.8	1.2	5.0
N. America	13.6	27.8	45.6	50.0	2.8	6.7	13.6	1.1
Oceania	2.1	4.4	5.5	6.0	1.7	13.5	16.4	4.9
World	**77.1**	**155.5**	**195.1**	**213.8**	**1.1**	**2.6**	**3.0**	**3.0**

Source: UNDP (2009)

Historical trends show that the international migrant stock increased from 2.6 of world population in 1960 to 3.1 per cent in 2010, whereas imports of goods and services increased from 12.1 per cent of world GDP in 1960 to 28.1 per cent in 2010 (Figure 3). This seems to support the hypothesis that the pace of trade liberalisation has been much faster than that of international labour movements.[4] Restrictive migration policies are likely to be the main explanation for the surprisingly small magnitude of international migration, rather than people’s lack of interest to move abroad (Mayda, 2011).

[4] However, people are less ‘mobile’ than goods and services, partly due to social reasons.

Figure 3: Migration and Trade Openness



Source: World Bank (2012)

The diversification of migration destinations

Another relevant trend is the large movements of people between developing countries – South-South migration. Migration from developing to developed countries (South-North migration) is estimated to account for 35 per cent of the total, while South-South migration amounts to 34 per cent – a further 25 per cent corresponds to migration between developed countries (UNDESA, 2011b).[5]

According to recent estimates, the stock of migrants born in the South and residing in the North has increased faster (85 per cent, from 40 million in 1990 to 74 million in 2010) than the stock of migrants born in the South and living in the South (22 per cent, from 60 million in 1990 to 73 million in 2010) (UNDESA, 2012a). However, it is important to highlight the weaknesses in the data, as in many developing countries there are no reliable figures for the population of immigrants. In some cases, particularly in the South, borders may be crossed with minimal formalities. This suggests that figures for migration between developing countries are likely to be underestimated (Ratha et al, 2007; Bakewell, 2009).[6]

Given that 'North' and 'South' are broad categories – and their usefulness as an analytical tool questionable –, it is important to look at regional dynamics and specific migrant corridors. The majority of migrants live within their region of origin, with the exception of those from Latin America and the Caribbean – explained by the significant migration to North America, particularly the United States (Table 2). Proximity, among other factors such as historical ties and the presence of social networks, is important in shaping the movements of people. This is more so in the case of migration between developing countries of similar income levels. The prospects of greater income differentials, as in the case of South-North migration, means people are prepared to travel longer distances (Ratha el al., 2007).

[5] 'North' and 'South' are broad categories. In the case of the latter, it bundles together very different countries and regions (for a discussion of definitional issues, see Bakewell, 2009). In fact, high income non-OECD countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are often included under the 'South' umbrella (Ratha et al. 2007).

[6] Differences in the measurement of migration between countries (e.g. foreign born versus nationality) as well as reporting lags in census data pose further difficulties (Ratha el al, 2007).

Table 2: International Migrant Stocks (2010)

		Destination (millions)						Total	Origin (%)
		Africa	Asia	Europe	LAC	N. America	Oceania		
Origin (million)	Africa	**15.5**	4.0	7.7	0.0	1.7	0.4	29.2	53
	Asia	1.0	**46.1**	19.0	0.3	14.2	2.0	82.6	56
	Europe	0.8	7.8	**37.3**	1.5	9.0	2.4	58.7	63
	LAC	0.0	0.6	3.9	**4.6**	23.5	0.1	32.8	14
	N. America	0.1	0.5	0.9	1.0	**1.4**	0.2	4.1	34
	Oceania	0.0	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.3	**0.9**	1.6	57
	Various	1.8	2.1	0.9	0.2	0.0	0.1	5.1	
	Total	19.3	61.3	69.9	7.7	50.0	6.0	214.2	
	Destination (%)	81	75	53	60	3	15		

Source: UNDESA (2012a)

Within different regions, it is possible to identify important migration destinations. For example, West Africa migrants from Sahel countries often chose to migrate to relatively more prosperous and politically stable coastal countries such as Ghana and Senegal. South Africa is another well-known receiving country in Africa. Within Latin America, Argentina (for migrants from Paraguay and Bolivia), Costa Rica (from Nicaragua) and Mexico (from Honduras and Guatemala) are all important migrant destinations. The same can be said of India (for migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal), Malaysia (from Indonesia) and Thailand (from Myanmar) (Zoomers and van Naerssen, 2006).

With regard to specific migration corridors, the largest are found between the United States and Mexico; Bangladesh and India; Turkey and Germany; India and United Arab Emirates; Philippines and the United States (Ratha et al, 2007).

In terms of the types of flows, there seems to be an increase in temporary and circular migration, rather than the permanent and unidirectional flows observed in the past.[7]

To conclude, future demographic trends and high income inequality across world citizens suggests that there will be a growing interest in using international migration as a policy tool to address inherent structural problems. The fact that migration flows remain relatively low – mainly due to policy restrictions – implies that there is plenty of scope for further action. The next section looks at the economic evidence on the impact of migration.

2.3 The impact of migration and remittances

Economic theory posits that the movement of labour across borders has the potential to produce significant economic gains. This is partly because migration enables people to specialise and benefit from their relative strengths (UNDP, 2009). While a significant share of these gains will accrue to migrants themselves, residents in source and destination countries are also likely to benefit from greater labour mobility.

There is a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that increased migration flows can generate very large aggregate benefits. Clemens (2011) reviews recent estimates from the literature and finds that eliminating (all) barriers to labour mobility can generate economic gains between 50 per cent and 150 per cent of world GDP. These gains are much larger than the potential benefits that would accrue from further liberalising trade and capital flows. To a certain extent, this is due to the fact that the liberalisation of labour movements has significantly lagged behind that of trade and finance.

[7] Circular migration can be defined as the recurring move between source and destination country in order to carry out seasonal or temporary work (UNDP, 2009). It can be contrasted to permanent and return migration.

While the full abolition of migration controls is politically unfeasible and possibly undesirable, the fact that migration flows remain heavily restricted suggests that the rewards from even small changes in policy can be very significant. Walmsley et al. (2011) estimate that a small increase in South-North migration – equivalent to 3 per cent of the labour force in developed countries – would increase world GDP by $288 billion. Most of these gains would be generated through increased quotas for unskilled labour, and would accrue to migrants, host country residents, and home country residents (via remittances). Aggregate economic gains of even larger magnitudes can be found in van der Mensbrugghe and Roland-Holst (2009).

Migration can have significant poverty reduction effects. Clemens et al. (2008) find large wage gaps between migrants in the US and residents in the respective source countries, even when controlling for observable characteristics (e.g., education, age, etc.) and selection bias (e.g., entrepreneurship). For example, the decision to migrate to the US is found to raise real wages by 200 per cent, 250 per cent and 680 per cent for Guatemalans, Filipinos and Haitians – respectively – after adjusting for purchasing power. The authors argue that migration barriers (which largely sustain this 'place premium') represent 'one of the largest remaining price distortions in any global market', which could even be seen as a form of wage discrimination. Thus, crossing international borders could be a vehicle to promote economic development and reduce world poverty. Milanovic (2011a) makes a similar case for migration as a tool to reduce global income inequality.[8] Nevertheless, some have questioned the extent to which migration can help the very poorest – see Skeldon (2003) – since migrating often requires significant financial resources (e.g., to cover transport and settling costs) and social networks, which might not be available to the poorest households.

Impacts on source countries

Another channel through which migration impacts on poverty reduction and development is the remittance flows accruing to source countries. It is difficult to estimate the real magnitude of these flows since many are transferred through informal channels and are therefore unrecorded. Even then, estimates suggest that remittances are often larger than other financial flows to developing countries – such as ODA and portfolio investments.[9] These tend to be more stable and counter-cyclical than other private flows, as the experience of the recent global crisis illustrates. Workers' remittances are particularly important for poor households, as they enhance consumption levels and can provide a vital safety net to protect against economic shocks. There is also evidence that remittances contribute to better outcomes in health and education (Ratha et al., 2011).

Furthermore, remittances can be an important source of foreign exchange for many poor countries – even if there are some concerns about real exchange rate appreciation. More recently, securitisation of remittance flows has enabled developing countries to leverage private finance from international capital markets. Finally, there has been an increased interest in tapping resources and knowledge from the Diasporas, namely through the issuance of Diaspora bonds to finance public infrastructure. Ratha et al. (2011) calculate that sub-Saharan African countries could raise between $5 billion to $10 billion per year through Diaspora bonds.

The empirical evidence on the impact of workers' remittances on GDP growth is not conclusive, possibly because remittance flows might be counter-cyclical – i.e., increase during economic downturns. Moreover, since they often finance consumption over investment, they are unlikely to be a dynamic and sustainable source of economic growth. Their impact on economic activity is likely to be mainly felt through indirect channels, such as by funding education and health expenditures, smoothing consumption patterns, and improving financial intermediation (Ratha

[8] For instance, the author argues that wages for unskilled workers in rich countries can often be 10 times higher than those in poor countries, suggesting that the (individual) gains from migration are very large.

[9] In 2010, migrants from developing countries sent more than $325 billion in (officially recorded) remittances to their home countries – about three times the volume of ODA (Ratha et al., 2011).

et al., 2011). However, there is also evidence that workers' remittances can have an important and direct impact on poverty levels. For instance, Adams and Page (2005) demonstrate that international migration and remittances significantly reduce the level, depth, and severity of poverty in developing countries.

There are some concerns that migration, particularly of skilled workers, may lead to a 'brain drain' in source countries, thus undermining human capital accumulation and socio-economic development. However, the empirical evidence tends to be mixed. For instance, Easterly and Nyarko (2008) suggest that the 'brain drain' is actually likely to produce a net benefit in source countries in Africa – based on calculations for Ghana. This is partly because the benefits accruing to migrants and their families (via remittances) can outweigh the losses of 'brain drain' (e.g., cost of education).[10] Moreover, improved migration prospects may have a beneficial impact on skills accumulation – which more than compensates the loss of skills – leading to an actual 'brain gain' (Stark et al., 1997).[11]

Finally, trying to stem emigration through immigration policy might not be particularly effective without addressing the incentives for migration. Countries could focus their resources on tackling migration 'push' factors, such as the lack of economic opportunities, natural disasters and conflicts.

Impacts on destination countries

In terms of the specific effects on destination countries' employment and wages, Ortega and Peri (2009) find that immigration increases employment and does not crowd-out residents in destination countries (natives).[12] In addition, the authors' simulations suggest that investment grows rapidly, increasing GDP in the receiving country without affecting average wages or labour productivity. In fact, labour productivity (and thus wages) might actually increase as low-skilled immigrants are willing to perform jobs that are unattractive to locals – encouraging a stronger focus on more productive jobs – while high-skilled migration promotes innovation. Mouhoud et al. (2011) argue that a zero-migration scenario could reduce employment and GDP growth by a significant amount in developed countries – especially in Europe and the US – when compared to a standard baseline scenario. In contrast, the authors estimate that a doubling in net migration rates would considerably boost GDP growth and employment levels.[13]

The available evidence suggests that the impact of increasing competition for low-skilled jobs is either negligible or small when compared to its gains (UNDP, 2009). But while the gains are usually shared across society (e.g., lower consumer prices), the potential negative impacts are likely to be borne by specific groups. In that case, governments could implement policies to minimise these transitory effects, such as re-training programmes to improve the skill set of local workers, thus increasing their employability as well as overall productivity and dynamism of the economy. Furthermore, governments can ensure that the wider economic benefits from migration are equitably shared among the population (e.g., through income redistribution). Identifying and exploring labour market complementarities (between local and foreign workers) is also crucial to boost the impact of migration on the host economy.[14]

[10] However, these benefits tend to accrue to the household, while the costs might be borne by society.
[11] Batista et al. (2012) provide empirical estimates of 'brain gain' for Cape Verde. The authors suggest that an increase in the 'probability of own future migration' increases the 'probability of completing intermediate secondary schooling' for individuals who do not migrate before the age of 16. Some argue that migration could incentivise over-investment in fields that have a higher demand abroad. However, there is little evidence on this beyond anecdotes (Gibson and McKenzie, 2011).
[12] It could also be argued that new migrants are more likely to compete with previous waves of migrants, rather than with native workers.
[13] This would address skilled-labour shortages and solve problems associated with population ageing – e.g., by increasing labour supply in both personal and health services. The macroeconomic impact would be fairly small, since net migration rates start from a low base. However, housing needs would need to be considered to accommodate the influx of migrants. Note that many studies of the impact of migration on destination countries focus on developed countries.
[14] For example, migrants can provide low-cost childcare and encourage mothers to go back to work.

Destination countries may face additional important challenges, such as the social integration of immigrants, and the potential fiscal costs of providing social services to migrants (Ratha et al., 2011). These are valid concerns that will need to be carefully addressed. For instance, governments could adopt policies that facilitate the integration of migrants in society and celebrate diversity, thus promoting social cohesion. Moreover, the potential fiscal costs need to be compared to the benefits of greater economic activity and thus tax revenues. Since migrants are typically young and healthy, they are unlikely to be heavy users of public services. In fact, the net fiscal contribution from immigration will depend on a number of factors, such as the characteristics of migrants, their impacts on the labour market, and the characteristics and rules of the welfare system. Evidence for the UK (and several other countries) suggests that the overall net fiscal impact of immigration is actually positive, albeit small (Vargas-Silva, 2011).

3 The Political Economy of International Migration

3.1 Receiving countries

Residents in receiving countries tend to oppose immigration, particularly low-skilled immigration. Some of the reasons for this resistance have been articulated above. Even if the evidence suggests that the negative impacts of migration on destination countries' labour markets tend to be relatively small, unskilled workers fear that greater inward migration will increase competition, thus leading to lower wages and possibly unemployment. Although these arguments are not too dissimilar from those applying to the liberalisation of trade and capital (i.e., asymmetric impacts across different groups), migration flows remain significantly more protected than the other two. There are also concerns about the potential burden that migrants place on public services. In addition, non-economic public attitudes against migration can be fuelled by nationalism and the concern of its impact on social cohesion. Some authors have also linked those attitudes to fears of expansion of the terrorist threat and security concerns (OECD, 2011). However, Mayda et al. (2006) conducted a study of public opinion and found that economic considerations weigh more heavily in public attitudes towards migration.

Public opinion has an important influence on immigration policy. A recent survey shows that over half of respondents in the United Kingdom and Italy think there are 'too many' immigrants (59 per cent and 53 per cent respectively) – see Clemens (2011).[15] This figure is lower for other developed countries: 37 per cent in the United States, 33 per cent in France, 27 per cent in Germany and the Netherlands, and 17 per cent in Canada.

As a result, politicians are often reluctant to be seen as soft on migration issues. Arguably, advocating for greater labour mobility for unskilled workers can be particularly challenging for politicians left-of-centre, since this position may alienate some of their core constituencies (Green, 2012). Moreover, campaigning organisations and development practitioners (including international NGOs), aware of the public mood, tend to stay away from the issue. Domestic NGOs often engage in the protection of migrants' rights rather than in linking migration and development.

In relation to the influence of public opinion on migration policy, many authors identified shortcomings in the communication of migration issues by the media, politicians and advocacy groups (IOM, 2011; OECD, 2011). Whilst the costs of migration are sometimes overplayed, the economic benefits backed up by the economic literature are rarely well articulated.

[15] A more recent study found that 75 per cent of the population in the UK favours reducing migration (The Migration Observatory, 2011).

There is a more general bias towards development *in situ* among development practitioners, prioritising development of places rather than people (Pritchett, 2006; Green, 2012). This often overlooks mobility as another tool for poverty reduction. Furthermore, some development agencies are overly focused on aid, and are avoiding other big issues that go beyond traditional aid debates. The latter is also often challenging, as it involves joining up policies from different government departments (Barder, 2012).

3.2 Source countries

The bias against labour mobility is not exclusively applicable to politicians and development practitioners in destination countries. According to a UN assessment, both developed and developing countries show similar trends in their views and policies on emigration. In 2001, over 70 per cent of countries in the sample thought their level of emigration was satisfactory, and 1 country in 5 had policies that sought to lower emigration. Furthermore, only 6 per cent of sampled countries in the less developed countries grouping stated that they aimed to raise emigration (UNDESA, 2002).

This is explained by the fact that governments often have concerns over 'brain drain' and longer-term national economic development, despite some evidence that the benefits of emigration can outweigh the costs – as set out in Section 2.2. Some would argue that remittances could be an incentive to encourage outward migration, while migration provides work and skills that can be valuable in the medium-term. Nonetheless, not many countries – with the exception of some of those taking part in the 'Colombo process'[16] – have an active emigration programme or integrate migration in their national development policies.

In short, as Barder (2012) rightly points out, there is no one to speak up for people disadvantaged by current immigration rules. Politicians and campaigners in both destination and source countries have reasons to overlook migration as a development tool. Bearing this in mind, the next section takes a closer look at existing immigration policies at different levels – international, regional and bilateral, and unilateral – and revisits the politics of migration to understand what could break the current impasse.

4 Policies and Proposals

4.1 International level: a lack of coordination

Most existing agreements granting labour market access are of bilateral or regional nature, with very few initiatives at the global level (Neumayer, 2006). In fact, with the exception of Mode 4 of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), most global initiatives focus on the protection of migrants' rights, the collection of data, research, policy dissemination, technical assistance and training, discussions and promotion of migration-related development initiatives.

The lack of a significant multilateral agreement seeking to lower barriers to migration can be attributed to the fact that countries are unlikely to cede national control over such a sensitive issue (with the EU's internal market being an exception). Moreover, countries seem unwilling to negotiate access in a multilateral forum, which could require extending privileges to a wide

[16] In response to calls from several Asian countries, a Ministerial Consultation for Asian Labour Sending Countries was held in 2003 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The ten initial participating states - Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam - made recommendations for the effective management of overseas employment programmes and agreed to have a series of follow-up meetings. Since then, member states of the 'Colombo Process' have met in Manila, Bali and Dhaka in 2004, 2005 and 2011 respectively to review and monitor the implementation of previous recommendations and identify areas of future action.

range of members and undermine other bilateral or regional efforts (which would be the case within the GATS Mode 4).

It is therefore useful to review some of the existing organisations and rules shaping migration policy at the global level. The oldest global organisation focusing on migration is the International Migration Organisation (IOM), which has existed under different names since 1951. It was created to help migrants – mainly refugees displaced by World War II – by identifying resettlement countries and arranging transport. Today it carries out a wide range of activities, including research, policy dissemination, technical assistance and promotion of migration-related programmes that maximise migration's benefits.[17]

The UN's 'International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families' and the ILO's 'Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration' are the two main multilateral frameworks dealing with migrants' rights. The former was adopted in 1990.[18] Unfortunately, its effectiveness is constrained by the fact that only about a quarter of member states have ratified it – many of them source countries. The ILO's 'Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration' includes 15 non-binding principles, such as decent work, effective management of labour migration, protection of migration workers, and migration and development (ILO, 2006). However, its non-binding nature restricts its influence (Basnett, 2013).

In 2003, the UN set up a Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) with a mandate to place international migration on the global agenda, analyse gaps in current policy approaches to migration, and examine inter-linkages with other areas. In 2006, the UN launched a High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development, 'a state-led process aimed at building effective partnerships to leverage the impact of international migration on development' (OECD, 2011). Although no formal mechanisms for cooperation emerged from this dialogue, it did encourage further discussion that gave rise to the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). This forum brings together origin, transit, and destination countries to discuss best policy practice. In addition, the Global Migration Group (GMG) was launched in 2006 to encourage inter-agency cooperation in the field of migration (e.g., ILO, UNDP, UNCHR, etc.) – and it also contributes to the GFMD. There have been calls to strengthen the GFMD, particularly to raise the level of officials involved as well as to encourage participation from other Ministries (not just Interior Ministers but also those charged with employment and economic development portfolios).

To date, the only multilateral forum dealing with labour market access issues is the WTO's GATS Mode 4. Through specific commitments, member states can allow foreign workers to provide services in specific sectors. However, commitments made by member states under Mode 4 have been limited to 'intra-corporate transferees' and focused on high-skilled service workers, which is unlikely to benefit developing countries significantly given their comparative advantage on unskilled labour (Basnett, 2013). Due to the political sensitivities surrounding 'foreign workers', it is quite unlikely that there will be much progress in expanding and deepening the scope of Mode 4.

In sum, while there are a number of organisations and frameworks dealing with migration at the global level, they are not adequately utilised and implemented, and only one deals with access issues – GATS Mode 4. Realistically, global level efforts are likely to be better channelled towards strengthening dialogue and exchanging experiences and practices – which is the aim of the GFMD and GMG. Monitoring and enforcement of labour access opportunities appears more feasible to be pursued at the regional, bilateral and national levels.

[17] Similarly the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had its origins in dealing with the consequences of World War II, including displacements and resettlements.
[18] Its origin dates back to 1970s when the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) raised concerns about discriminatory treatment of migrant workers in host countries (Basnett, 2013).

4.2 Regional and bilateral agreements

The European Union is the best-known example of regional integration where the principle of free labour market movements is deeply embedded. In the case of Africa, the Economic Community of West African Countries (ECOWAS) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) have agreed protocols on free movement. The Southern Common Market (Mercosur) also has agreements to facilitate labour movements across borders, and so does the East African Community's Common Market Protocol. Despite embracement in principle, regional blocks (except for the EU) have kept the movement of people restricted in practice (OECD, 2011).

The East African Community's Common Market Protocol provides a good example of the restrictions put in place (Basnett, 2013). The Protocol requires workers originating from and moving within the partner states to be granted permits prior to being employed, and citizens of the East African Community are extended little exclusive privileges for entry and stay. In addition, the definition of 'workers' is limited to highly skilled professionals, while the provisions for mutual recognition of professional qualifications and experiences are not sufficiently outlined.

Overall, progress on regional mobility has been slow. Although the specific reasons for this will be context specific, in some cases income gaps may not be sufficiently large and demographic structures significantly different between neighbouring labour markets.

However, there are reasons to think that regional labour mobility could become more important in the future. These include the fluidity of the 'receiving/source countries' classification, changing economic conditions, and emerging skill shortages/oversupply. Moreover, the introduction of information systems could help raise awareness of skill shortages in specific regions and possibly stimulate specialisation, which in turn could help encourage regional labour mobility.

Increasing labour mobility can also be negotiated at the bilateral level, for instance through temporary migration agreements. Two well-known examples of such schemes are the 'Bracero' programme that brought temporary Mexican workers to the US (1942-1964) and the 'Gastarbeiter' system that recruited temporary migrants to Germany from a number of Mediterranean countries (1955-1973). The Gulf States, Israel, Singapore, Korea, and New Zealand also have similar schemes.[19]

One of the advantages of such agreements is that they are flexible and can therefore be adapted to changing labour market dynamics in receiving countries. They can also be appealing to source countries. The return of temporary workers may counter the 'brain drain' type of concerns. Moreover, if the family stays in their country of origin, and migrants only leave temporarily, these could potentially translate into more political support from source countries' constituencies for such agreements. On the negative side, one reason why these agreements went out of fashion is that workers often overstayed – becoming irregular migrants.

There have been proposals calling for more widespread use of bilateral work agreements, which seek to benefit poor people in developing countries while being politically acceptable to voters in developed and emerging economies. Pritchett (2007) emphasises that in bilaterally agreed programmes, destination countries need to certify their labour shortages in specific industries, while source countries commit to take responsibility to ensure that temporary

[19] The New Zealand's Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE), launched in 2007, set out to cover labour shortages in low-wage temporary/seasonal demand in the agricultural sector. World Bank evaluations of the programme show positive effects for source countries: it increased income and consumption of households, allowed households to purchase more durable goods, increased subjective standard of living, and had additional benefits at the community level (Gibson and McKenzie, 2010).

workers actually return home. Labour shortages would need to be demonstrated by employers showing that a certain number of jobs could not be filled, and could be subject to challenge by trade unions and other interested parties. Sending countries could see their future quotas for the programme decrease if workers fail to return home, although enforcing such controls is quite challenging. Another possibility would be to provide incentives for returning home.
Arguably it is far more feasible to negotiate labour access and introduce monitoring and enforcement mechanisms bilaterally – and perhaps regionally – rather than at the international level.

4.3 Unilateral actions: small change, big impact?

Receiving countries

There have also been a number of proposals suggesting that destination countries' immigration policy could be used much more effectively as a development tool. Small changes in these systems could make a significant difference in terms of poverty reduction (Clemens, 2011).

In the US context, Orrenius and Zavodny (2010) argue that the US system gives a low priority to work-based immigration. The authors suggest that provisional work-based visas sponsored by employers would improve the economy's competitiveness. At the same time, provided these were open to migrants from poor countries, it could also have an impact on global poverty reduction.

Box 1: Migration as a tool for disaster recovery

Although this paper is mainly concerned with labour migration, it is important to acknowledge other reasons for migration – such as natural disasters and conflict. Clemens (2011) suggests that migration policy can be used as a tool for disaster recovery. After the earthquake in Haiti, the author explored different options to open the US labour market to Haitians seeking to migrate.

Currently, those trying to migrate for reasons related to natural disasters do not qualify as refugees, and therefore cannot use that route to enter the US. Most of the alternatives explored by the authors included minor administrative or legislative changes.[20] In the end, Haiti was added to the list of nationalities that can qualify for temporary low-skilled work, providing another tool for disaster relief.

This type of policy could be replicated in other countries. Furthermore, other alternatives such as expanding the concept of humanitarian protection to include those fleeing from natural disasters could also be explored.

Barder (2012) also considers other specific immigration policies that link migration to development policy. For instance, many countries face a shortage of medical workers, particularly nurses and care workers, and this is likely to increase with an ageing population. Hence, destination countries could contribute to the financing of migrants' training. Australia is involved in this type of programme; through the Australia-Pacific Technical College, it funds training for neighbouring countries.

In addition, administrative barriers to migration from developing countries could also be investigated and tackled, such as processes to certify education credentials gained abroad, which can a barrier to the movement of labour (UNDP, 2009).

[20] For example, these included amending the non-migrant visa classification to allow for Haitian family reunification or establishing a humanitarian route for those in circumstances not covered by the current refugee definition – see Clemens and Farrell (2011).

Sending countries

Countries with a large proportion of migrants and a large share of remittances can also put policies in place to maximise the impact of migration on development. For example, since 2005 the 'Colombo process' countries have taken steps to manage migration outflows more effectively throughout the migration cycle. This entails not only protecting workers from exploitative practices, but also providing pre-departure information, assisting during their stay abroad (including strengthened support in diplomatic missions in key destination countries), and helping with their economic and social reintegration back home. Lowering the costs of migration (including document fees and costs associated with sending remittances back home), and providing financial support (for example through welfare funds) are also among the policies put in place. Furthermore, some countries, such as Mexico, have introduced policies to channel remittances to community level projects.[21]

The case of the Philippines is one of the most commonly cited. Since the 1970s it institutionalised labour migration, developing a state's overseas employment strategy. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) has been the sole government entity with the authority to regulate temporary overseas employment, including the activities of private recruitment agencies for over 25 years.

Bangladesh and other countries part of the Colombo process are also implementing policies that seek to enhance the developmental impact of migration. This includes improving the regional and bilateral dialogues with destination countries to increase employment opportunities and conditions, better supervision and regulation of recruitment agencies, and the reduction of migration costs for workers.

For example, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Government of Bangladesh have also set up a Migrant Resource Centres (MRC) in the capital in 2008 and have set up similar centres in seven other key migrant-sending districts in 2010 and 2011. In addition to providing valuable information, the MRCs cross-check employment contracts, visa papers and other important documents of migrant workers to further ensure safe migration. Additionally, a Market Research Unit (MRU) has been set up to promote the skills of Bangladeshi migrants and explore new job markets for Bangladeshi workers (Agunias et al., 2012).

4.4 Searching for advocates of greater labour mobility

Interest in international migration, and more specifically in the links between migration and development, has been growing. A number of experts in academia, think-tanks and multilateral organisations have put forward convincing economic arguments and evidence on the benefits from increased labour mobility.[22]

However, the current odds of increasing labour market access to (unskilled) workers in developed and emerging economies, particularly at the international level, seem very low. The

[21] In Mexico's 3x1 Programme, municipal, state and federal governments treble the amount of money sent by migrant associations. In principle, this is an attractive idea to channel funds to community projects. That said, some evidence suggests that the projects may be subject to political manipulation. Furthermore, given that migration often does not always involve the poorest (given transaction costs, such as transport and administrative fees), remittances, and by extension benefits from this programme are not concentrated in the poorest states (Meseguer and Aparicio, 2009).
[22] In 2009 UNDP's Human Development Report focused on this issue. In addition, the UNDP, the World Bank and the G20 have all argued for a reduction in the costs of transferring money abroad (remittances), so that source countries can increase the benefits from migration.

slow progress on GATS Mode 4[23] and adverse public attitudes towards migration – possibly intensified by the current economic situation –[24] provide some support for this scepticism.

However, some of these views may change when confronted with strong exogenous pressures, most notably ageing populations in developed and some emerging economies. This will lead to increasing demand for young workers as economies are likely to face labour shortages and the associated negative economic consequences.

There are other factors that in theory could help change current perceptions of migration, but their influence is likely to be weaker than that coming from demographic pressures. Migration related to natural disasters is becoming more common, and is set to intensify in the absence of decisive actions to deal with climate change (a 'push' factor driving migration). Although this is unlikely to change views on migration it could help to change the global politics if there was greater pressure from disaster-prone countries to increase labour mobility.

Finally, we could also think that the case for greater international labour mobility could be much better articulated by all interested stakeholders – partly by highlighting the existing evidence on the benefits for both receiving and source countries and working more closely with Diasporas.

5 Implications for a Post-2015 Framework

Between now and 2015, governments and other stakeholders will actively discuss what might replace the current set of MDGs. However difficult, at some point the debate on a future global development framework will have to discuss issues that go beyond traditional development cooperation and that can have a substantial impact on development outcomes.

Some have argued that development goals and targets should focus on 'outcomes' rather than 'means' (Vandemoortele, 2012), as the latter are context-specific and would be unconstructive to be overly prescriptive at the global level. Following this logic, migration should not be (explicitly) included in a post-2015 framework, since it is mainly a 'means' to achieve some desirable goals. However, the type of issues included in MDG 8 on Global Partnerships for Development – aid, debt relief, trade, and knowledge transfer – referred to means rather than ends. These were means that required shared responsibilities between countries, particularly actions from developed economies that would significantly contribute to unlock development gains. Migration, although not included in the original framework, also falls into this category.

One possible way of including international migration would be to ensure that its potential role in reducing poverty and fostering human development (an 'enabler' in the language used by the UN System Task Team on Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, 2012) is mentioned, among other factors, in a possible statement to be agreed among world leaders in 2015. While this could be seen as a mere formality, it could significantly contribute to raise awareness and shape views on the role that migration can play in a post-2015 context.

Implementation of such a statement would be pursued at regional, bilateral and national levels. For example, discussions on mobility and access to labour markets would continue to be

[23] It is interesting that many emerging economies' proposals on GATS Mode 4 (temporary labour mobility) provided no concessions with regards to low-skilled workers, suggesting a similar position to that adopted by developed countries. Arguably, proposals can reflect a negotiating strategy rather than a real stance (Winters, 2010).
[24] Analysis of trends in labour mobility during previous recessions provides useful lessons. It shows the deceleration of migrant flows to major destination countries, few returning migrants working in countries undergoing economic stress, and a general tightening of immigration regimes (Winters, 2010). There is already evidence of some of these trends in the recent recession.

left to bilateral and regional agreements, as they have to be responsive to specific contexts and needs. Further, countries, where relevant, could include migration as part of their national strategies to achieve future development goals in line with on-going efforts to link migration and development (GFMD, 2012).

Alternatively, and perhaps more ambitiously, a new global development agreement could be more explicit about migration and include a series of recommendations (for both receiving and sending countries) as part of 'partnerships goals' – in the spirit of MDG 8. For instance, destination countries – including developed and developing economies – could be encouraged to consider temporary work visa programmes (e.g., expanding labour market access to low-skilled migrants and disaster-affected refugees) and other small changes to their immigration policies that could benefit migrants, destination and source countries. At the same time, source countries could consider migration as another (complementary) policy option in their national development strategies, and thus design policies to maximise its impact on the domestic economy. At the international level, stronger efforts could be made to reduce the costs of remittances, as well as strengthening and consolidating the work of different international organisations on migration and development. Despite considerable political and practical difficulties (not least data limitations) the possibility of developing some indicators to track progress could be considered, and there are already some efforts in this direction.

Although the political challenges of agreeing on these issues cannot be underestimated, strengthening MDG 8 could chime with some views expressed by some developing countries. There is a sense that the current MDGs focused on the actions from developing countries, but were much looser about the responsibilities and commitments expected from developed countries. Arguably, the MDG 8 was one of the weakest goals in terms of its specificity and design. In fact, progress towards its achievement has stalled, and there are signs of reversals (UNDESA, 2012b).

The politics of migration are extremely challenging and there are good reasons to believe that policymakers would rather stay away from it in the short-term, particularly as the economic crisis continues to unravel. Nonetheless, as demographic changes heighten pressures on countries' labour markets and fiscal budgets, the situation is likely to shift. In the meantime, small changes in both receiving and source countries' policies, increasing engagement with Diasporas, and a continuous push to link migration and development (including at bilateral and regional levels) could help pave the way towards greater mobility of labour.

Although migration is not the only policy option available to increase global living standards, it can be an important complement to international action on other fronts. Tackling misinformation and inertia around these issues will be a major challenge in the coming years.

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