

Human Mobility in an Age of Division: Integrating the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework and the Human Security Perspective

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Introduction

Human mobility is becoming an increasingly important area of focus in international development. The categories of “migrants” and “refugees”¹ have long been differentiated

¹ Based on definitions established under international law and by international organizations, the following terminology is used in this paper. *Refugee*: Under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the term “refugee” refers to a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside their country of nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country. Refugees are protected under an international legal framework and fall under the mandate of the UNHCR. *Migrant*: The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as a person who moves across an international border and resides in a country other than their country of origin, typically for twelve months or more. While the IOM’s broader definition encompasses refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, this paper uses the term primarily to refer to those who move voluntarily. *Forcibly displaced person*: The UNHCR defines “forced displacement” as the compelled movement of people who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of armed conflict, violence, persecution, human rights violations, or disasters, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The IOM, for its part, defines “forced migration” as movement driven not only by conflict and persecution but also by natural disasters and environmental degradation that endanger life, liberty, or livelihood. In this paper, except where a specific definition is explicitly invoked, the term “forcibly displaced persons” encompasses both definitions.

under their respective legal frameworks and institutional arrangements. However, given the changing patterns of population movement today, there is a growing need to address international human mobility in a more comprehensive manner from the perspective of development cooperation. Human mobility constitutes a dynamic, intersecting, and complex process, making it difficult to render singular judgments about who needs what, when, and how. The human security perspective, with its focus on the individual, may serve as one key to understanding this complexity.

This paper first reviews the landscape surrounding international human mobility and offers an overview of how this issue has converged with the major agendas of development. It then traces the new perspectives brought by Hein de Haas’s theory, which understands international migration as “*an intrinsic part of development and social transformation*.” Finally, by overlaying this theoretical model with the human security perspective, the paper examines what insights can be gained when considering directions for supporting human mobility.

1. The Current State of Human Mobility

Castles and Miller (2003) characterized the contemporary era as “the age of migration,” noting that “globalization has caused international migration to affect almost every country

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in the world, transforming politics, economies, and societies.” As economic disparities, political conflicts, and clashes of cultural values become increasingly visible and global divisions deepen, international human mobility stands as one of the most complex policy challenges of the twenty-first century. In 2022, the number of international migrants² worldwide reached 281 million, an increase of approximately 60% since 2000 (IOM 2024). In 2024, international remittances from overseas residents to developing countries are projected to reach \$685 billion, an increase of 5.8% from the previous year, surpassing the combined total of foreign direct investment and ODA (World Bank 2024).

When viewed from the perspective of development cooperation, international human mobility differs from other development agendas in that donor countries themselves may also be receiving countries, involving them more directly as stakeholders. While there are many cross-border challenges, such as infectious diseases, climate change, and global supply chains, human mobility in particular tends to be closely linked to domestic politics.

In receiving countries, migrants are often perceived as targets of exclusion or as threats. In recent years, however, they have been repositioned as “an opportunity to benefit society” (World Bank 2023) and reevaluated as actors who can contribute to sustainable development in both countries of origin and destination (UNDESA 2024). With appropriate policy design, human mobility can become a driver of development that benefits both origin and receiving countries (World Bank 2023; UNDESA 2024).

Research on human mobility has historically developed primarily around receiving countries in Europe and North America (de Haas et al. 2020), but international migration has also been expanding in Asia in recent years. The influx of labor migrants and international students to Japan has also been growing rapidly, reaching a record high in 2023. Although the ratio of foreign residents to the total population stands at 3%, lower than in Western countries, Japan ranks fourth among OECD countries in annual new admissions of temporary workers (OECD 2024). Themes such as population

decline, labor force retention, and multicultural coexistence are becoming shared concerns not only in Western countries but also in Asian countries, including Japan.

2. Human Mobility from a Development Perspective: The Convergence of Refugee Issues and Migration with Development

Research on human mobility has long been treated as a separate policy domain from development cooperation discussions (Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002), but it has gradually converged with the development cooperation agenda around two pillars: refugees and migrants. Traditional international law and institutions regulate refugees and other migrants under fundamentally different frameworks of status and protection. Refugees, as people fleeing persecution, are protected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Countries that have ratified the Convention are therefore obligated to implement protection through domestic law. Migrants, on the other hand, are considered to be engaged in essentially voluntary movement and are primarily governed by the domestic laws of receiving countries, such as immigration control laws and labor laws (Sato 2020).

The discourse on refugees began primarily from a humanitarian standpoint against the backdrop of post-World War II refugee issues. Following the Rwanda crisis and the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, UNHCR began to engage in activities such as education, vocational training, and host community support (UNHCR 1997), and the logic of development assistance was fully incorporated (Crisp 2001). Also significant in this period was UNHCR's expansion of support for internally displaced persons (IDPs) under High Commissioner Sadako Ogata, which originated from the issue of Kurdish people displaced by the Iraq War, representing an important turning point. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) proposed the concept of human security in 1994, and the 2003 final report of the Commission on

² This report defines international migrants as “people living outside their country of birth,” a definition that includes refugees.

Human Security, *Human Security Now* (Commission on Human Security 2003), articulated the twin pillars of protection and empowerment, offering a new direction for a form of assistance that had been centered primarily on protection.

In recent years, the importance of the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus has been discussed in relation to refugee issues. This comprehensive nexus aims to advance emergency response, recovery, development, and peacebuilding together, while also enabling relevant actors to pursue common outcomes in a coordinated manner, even in cases where the cycle of recovery, reconstruction, and development stagnates, as seen in the protracted Syrian refugee crisis.

By comparison, the recognition of migration as a development issue came somewhat later. Initially treated as a peripheral agenda in the context of population policy and labor market analysis, the importance of remittances attracted growing attention following the advance of globalization from the 1990s onward, and the relationship between migration and development became widely recognized. In the 2000s, when the migration-development nexus (Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002) was proposed, discussions on migration and development began to gain momentum. In 2010, the Global Migration Group (GMG) was launched by international development institutions. In 2015, SDG Target 10.7 called for promoting “safe, orderly, and regular migration,” and the *World Development Report 2023* (World Bank 2023) reframed human mobility as an opportunity that can benefit society. The 2016 incorporation of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as a related organization of the United Nations also symbolized the shift in international recognition toward positioning migration as a development agenda.

From the 2010s onward, against the backdrop of the Syrian crisis, refugees and migrants were simultaneously placed at the center of international agendas. The New York Declaration of 2016 was adopted as the first international framework to comprehensively address both, in response to large-scale movements of refugees and migrants. However, the “Global Compact on Refugees” and the “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration,” both adopted in 2018, were developed through separate processes, and the documents explicitly stated that the two are governed by

different legal frameworks (UNHCR 2018; UN General Assembly 2018).

In practice, mixed movements are occurring, in which refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, victims of trafficking, and migrants with various motivations travel through the same regular and irregular routes and means of transportation (UNHCR 2022). People with different legal statuses and protection needs are intermingled, requiring that each individual’s situation be appropriately understood and addressed. International legal frameworks continue to distinguish between refugees and other migrants in their treatment of human mobility, but actual movement patterns are complex and fluid, and institutional responses have not fully kept pace with people’s realities. The aspirations-capabilities framework, or A-C framework, developed by de Haas (2021), provides a perspective for comprehensively understanding such mobility without relying on legal categories.

3. Development through the Lens of Human Mobility Research: de Haas’s Aspirations-Capabilities Model

3.1. The Emergence of the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework: Connection to Sen

The A-C framework is an attempt to overcome the limitations of conventional research on human mobility. In earlier research, migration was explained primarily through the push-pull model of classical economic theory, with wage differentials as the primary driving factor (Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro 1969). However, the fact that more than 96% of the world’s population remains in their country of birth despite destination wages being three to six times higher (Clemens 2011) cannot be explained by economic factors alone.

The A-C framework therefore redefines migration not as a passive response to external economic, political, environmental, or demographic factors, but as a more complex social process arising from the interaction between individual agency and

external factors. This framework is grounded in Amartya Sen's capability approach. Sen (1999) defined development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy," arguing that freedom is both the end and the means of development.

The A-C framework applies this perspective to mobility, understanding agency as comprising "aspirations" and "capabilities," and migration as an active choice of where to live. The freedom of movement includes not only the ability to move but also "the freedom to choose not to move." By organizing mobility along two axes— aspirations and capabilities—the A-C framework classifies migration into four quadrants (**Table 1**),³ making it possible to capture previously invisible situations such as those of people who "want to move but cannot" or "do not want to move but are forced to."

- **High Aspirations / Low Capabilities: Involuntary Immobility**
Refers to people who strongly desire to move but cannot do so in practice due to a lack of economic, social, or legal resources.
- **Low Aspirations / Low Capabilities: Acquiescent Immobility**
Refers to what might be called the "invisible vulnerable"—those with little aspiration or ability to move and who cannot even conceive of mobility as an option.
- **High Aspirations / High Capabilities: Voluntary Mobility**
Refers to people who desire to move and have the resources and networks to do so; corresponds to the most common contemporary migrant category.

³ In this paper, the four-quadrant table adapted from de Haas is presented with dividing lines added and quadrant numbers assigned (**Table 1**).

- **Low Aspirations / High Capabilities: Voluntary Immobility / Involuntary Mobility**

Refers to individuals who have the capacity to move but choose not to; involuntary mobility refers to situations in which people, such as refugees, are compelled to move due to external factors, including conflict, in ways that significantly constrain their choices.

3.2. The Inverted-U Pattern Between Development and Human Mobility

In addition to using aspirations and capabilities to classify different forms of mobility, de Haas noted that the combination of aspirations and capabilities can change dynamically as development progresses. In the early stages of a society's development, both remain at low levels, but aspirations rise rapidly ahead of capabilities as access to education and information expands. Since improvements in capabilities lag behind and rise more gradually than aspirations, the gap between the two generates a "migration hump"—a temporary increase in migration. Conversely, as development advances, capabilities improve and mobility becomes possible. At the same time, rising economic standards simultaneously cause aspirations to plateau, resulting in migration rates that follow an inverted-U trajectory (**Figure 1**). This theoretically and empirically overturns the conventional linear understanding that "people from poor regions move outward in search of economic opportunities and remain in place once they become prosperous," suggesting the need to understand the relationship between migration and development in a more dynamic and phased manner.

Table 1 Four Quadrants of the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework and Mobility Patterns

		Migration capabilities	
		Low	High
Migration aspirations (intrinsic and/or instrumental)	High	Quadrant ② Involuntary immobility^a (feeling 'trapped')	Quadrant ① Voluntary mobility (most forms of migration)
	Low	Quadrant ③ Acquiescent immobility^b	④.1 Voluntary immobility and ④.2 involuntary mobility refugees, 'soft deportation' ^c Quadrant ④

Source: Adapted by the authors from de Haas (2021).

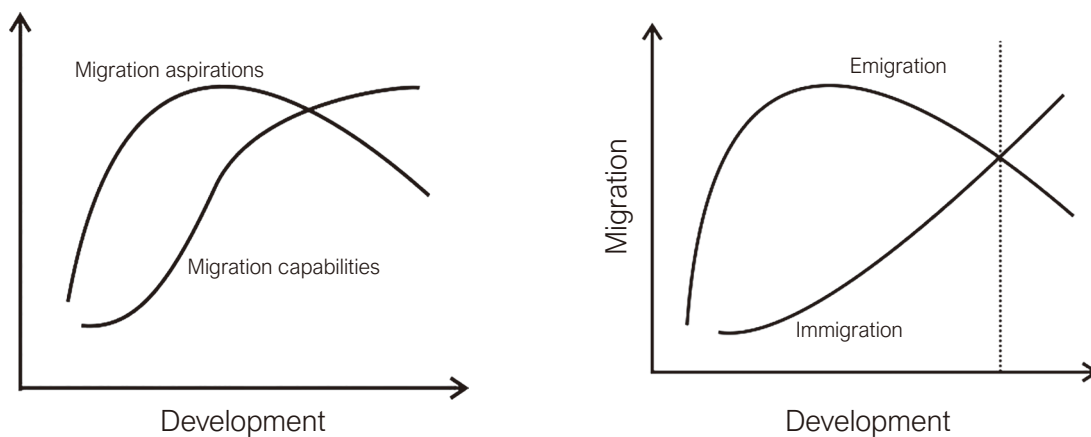


Figure 1 Diagram of the Relationships between Development Progress, Aspirations-Capabilities, and Migration Rates

Source: de Haas (2010)

4. Toward an Integration of the A-C Framework and Human Security

Human security is a concept that emerged from the need to address challenges that cannot be handled at the national level. At its core is the protection of the life, livelihood, and dignity of individuals, and it comprises three strategies: protection from threats, empowerment to strengthen autonomy and the capacity for choice, and solidarity. In addition, four principles provide important perspectives in these efforts: a people-centered approach, comprehensiveness, context-sensitivity, and prevention-oriented thinking (Commission on Human Security 2003).

What kinds of questions are opened up by overlaying this perspective onto the A-C framework? First, when we treat individuals who continue to make choices about mobility as agents, how can we comprehensively take into account the temporal and spatial continuity of their movement? Second, rather than generalizing about movement to Europe and North America, how can we give appropriate weight to diverse contexts, including those of developing countries that host more than half of the world's refugees and non-OECD countries that account for 40% of labor migrants? Third, how can the balance between protection and empowerment be

dynamically adjusted in response to changes in the circumstances of mobile persons, and how can countries of origin, receiving countries, and the international community act in solidarity and cooperation, including in the period before migration takes place? New possibilities for supporting human mobility may be found in responding to these questions.

Figure 2 overlays the protection and empowerment support needs onto the dynamic changes that accompany development progress in the A-C framework. Protection prevents the decline of capabilities, while empowerment enhances capabilities and expands the options for pursuing aspirations. The relative weight of the two shifts in response to circumstances, and they function in a complementary manner. This integration may open up the possibility of envisioning a support framework that goes beyond the binary of “migrant/refugee” or “moving/not moving” and responds to the complex realities of actual movement.⁴

5. Bridging Research and Practice

As exclusionary tendencies gain visibility across different contexts, what should development cooperation concerning human mobility look like? This paper has presented an

⁴ For a more detailed analysis and proposed framework, see the JICA Ogata Research Institute Discussion Paper (Saito et al. 2026).

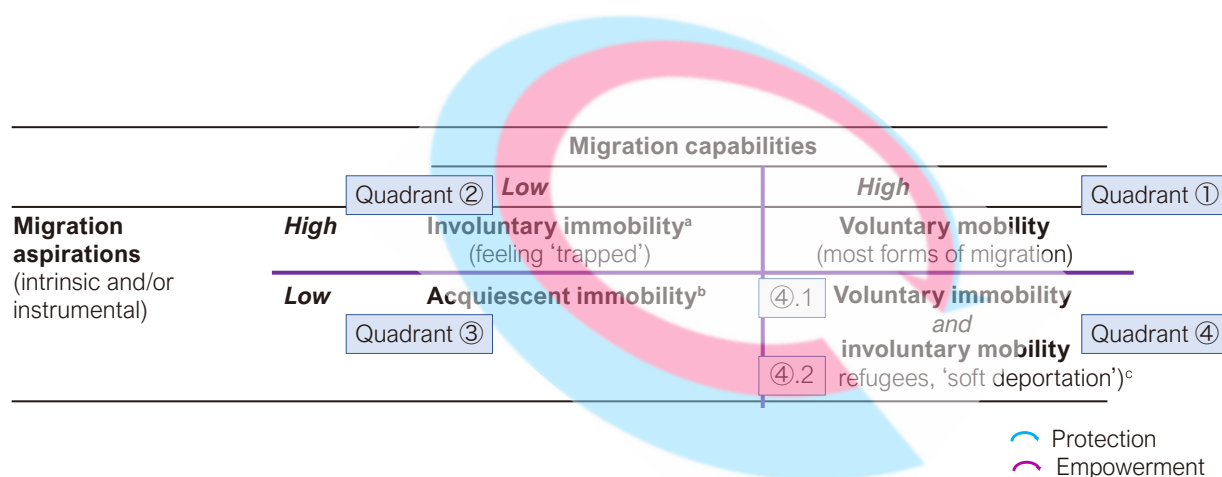


Figure 2 Changes in the Relative Weight of Protection and Empowerment Interventions within the A-C Framework: An Application of the A-C Framework

Source: Adapted by the authors from de Haas (2021).

integrated framework combining the A-C framework and the human security approach with the goal of deepening this discussion. This framework suggests the need for an alternative policy direction beyond approaches centered solely on deterrence or laissez-faire responses. Protection that safeguards the life and rights of each individual, empowerment that expands options, and solidarity with sending and receiving societies—these three strategies serve flexible policy design that can be reconfigured according to context and circumstances.

For this framework to be meaningful in practice, several challenges must continue to be addressed. First, it is necessary to examine how aspirations and capabilities transform over time. The relationships between mobile persons and sending and receiving societies change over extended periods.⁵ These changes extend beyond quantitative increases and decreases; the very factors that constitute aspirations and capabilities interact with and qualitatively transform each other. These dynamics may trace more complex trajectories than the smooth curve depicted by de Haas.⁶

Second, there is the challenge that legal categories such as “refugee” or “migrant” do not necessarily capture changes in people’s circumstances and support needs as they progress through their journey. Efforts are underway to analyze how life, livelihood, and dignity are threatened or protected within the continuity of movement.⁷ Such empirical research can help verify and refine the integrated framework.

The integrated model presented here is a framework intended to stimulate discussion and exploration. Yet in a world where division and social exclusion are spreading, there is profound significance in reconceiving people on the move not merely as “objects of management,” but as “agents who choose their own life, livelihood, and dignity.”

It is hoped that this paper may serve as a small foothold in exploring how to support human mobility, with human security as a common language, in pursuit of a society that leaves no one behind.

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