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Cross-border migration and travel: a virtuous relationship

International migration boosts travel and vice versa. This has economic virtue but is challenging for public policy

Keywords: Cross-border mobility, VFR, business travel, networks, ICT

ELEVATOR PITCH

The ongoing relationships between immigrants and their families, friends and business contacts back home boost outbound and inbound cross-border travel. Conversely, cross-border tourism, business trips and study may trigger subsequent migration. New communication technologies, such as social media and video chat, only partially substitute for meeting in person. In fact, the greater use of such technologies leads to a greater demand for meeting in person. Cross-border movement, short-term or long-term, is becoming more complex and diverse. This creates challenges for measurement, but also for defining target populations for legislation and public policies.

Source: TeleGeography; World Trade Organization; McKinsey Global Institute analysis

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

+ The ongoing relationships between immigrants and friends & relatives back home stimulate the tourism sector in migrant origin and destination countries.
+ A country's diaspora strengthen international business networks, which leads to growing trade and diffusion of innovation.
+ Advances in information and communication technologies make it easier to maintain relationship capital across borders and thereby lower the cost of migration.
+ Temporary migration and travel for study, tourism or business to a migrant destination are effective pathways to subsequent successful settlement.

Cons

– Growing global mobility and the increasing complexity of migration and travel flows reduce the usefulness of conventional statistics on people flows and stocks.
– Laws, regulations and institutions developed to manage permanent and long-term settlement are not adequate in an era of increasing mobility and transnationalism.
– For countries to share in the burden of providing social security to transnational populations will require new bilateral or multilateral arrangements, and will probably necessitate a greater role for cross-border portable private sector insurance.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Growing international migration triggers growing cross-border travel and vice versa. This self-reinforcing process has major economic benefits. Although new communication technologies make virtual interaction an effective substitute (with potentially large environmental benefits) for meeting in person, research to date suggests that information and communication technologies often complement rather than substitute for migration-induced travel. The interrelationships between travel and migration remain under-researched and the full implications for public policy have also yet to be considered.

MOTIVATION

People cross country borders more than ever before. Sometimes it is merely to visit a foreign destination briefly for work, pleasure or other reasons; at other times the purpose is to take up residence, temporarily or permanently, in a foreign country. Both international travel and international migration have been growing fast over the last half century or so and are part of the global increase of flows of all kinds: goods, services, finance, information and people. All these flows are growing due to intensifying global economic integration, facilitated by trade liberalisation, the declining real costs of international travel and communication, and the information and communication technologies (ICT) that have vastly improved the accessibility of information about foreign destinations and the means of communicating with people abroad, for example through Voice over the Internet Protocol (VOIP) audio and video call apps, such as Skype. However, geography still matters and flows of all kinds satisfy the social sciences equivalent of Newton's gravity model of physics. In the case of international migration and shot-term travel, flows are inversely correlated with the distance between origin and destination countries; and positively correlated with the scale of population and of economic activity in both countries. Distance can be measured in this context in several ways. Besides geographic distance it can also refer to the cultural and institutional distance between origin and destination countries. Furthermore, higher income increases mobility of all forms. This paper focuses on how international migration and travel reinforce each other and on the related challenges for policy.

DISCUSSION OF PROS AND CONS

How much cross-border migration and travel is there?

At the global level it is hard to quantify the total volume of international travel. However, it is safe to say that air travel is the dominant mode for cross-border transportation of people. Data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA) show that the number of international airline passengers has in recent years grown around 6 percent per annum and may reach 1.5 billion by 2016. A significant proportion of these trips have the purpose of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) who are living in another country. Asked about the main purpose of their international travel, about 20-40 percent of travellers will say that VFR is the main purpose.

Based on the trend revealed in recent UN data, the number of people living abroad, i.e. the global stock of international migrants – including a third of an estimated 60 million refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons – may be approaching 250 million, or about 3.5 percent of the world population. These migrants will trigger travel back to the home country (outbound VFR) but they will also be visited from time to time by some of the relatives and friends they left behind (inbound VFR). Migrants may also continue to have work-related relationships with people in the home country that may trigger visits in both directions as well. Such interrelationships between migration and travel depend on the type of migration: labour and entrepreneurial migration; migration for study; and transnational living for retirement or other reasons [1].

As international mobility patterns are becoming increasingly complex, the boundaries between migration and travel are increasingly blurred. Education abroad, temporary migration, seasonal work, tourists on working holidays, trans-national company transfers, foreign assignments, cross-border retirement, and commuting between multiple residencies all generate a significant volume of cross-border travel, but can also be seen as forms of international migration if the person concerned spends much of any twelve month period in one particular country which is not the person's country of birth (see Background Information Box 1). In conventional travel statistics, international migration is defined as an outbound traveller intending to live abroad for 12 months or more or an inbound traveller from abroad intending to stay for a period of twelve months or more. Travel and migration statistics are derived from information obtained at borders, or through population registration systems, censuses and surveys.

Background Information Box 1. Defining international migration and travel

Defining international migration is not straightforward. The United Nations defines an *international migrant* as a person who resides in a country that is not the person's country of birth. However, some countries include children born in a host country with at least one parent born abroad among the migrant population, in that case sometimes referred to as the *allochthonous* population.

The notion of "residing" is open to different interpretations. A person may have the right to indefinitely live in a certain foreign country (i.e., has the right to *permanent residency*) but not actually spend much time there. More commonly, residency is defined by actual behavior. For example, a foreign person may be considered a *resident for tax purposes* if s/he spends 183 days or more of any fiscal year in a country.

Migration statistics are often based on *intended* behavior collected by means of surveys of arrivals and departures. In that case, an *immigrant* is defined as a person whose country of last permanent residence is not the country of arrival and who states an intention of staying for 12 months or more, irrespective of whether that will turn out to be the actual duration of stay. With an intended stay of less than 12 months, a person arriving is considered an *inbound visitor*. Similarly, a resident leaving is an *emigrant* if s/he intends to stay away for 12 months or longer, otherwise s/he is an *outbound visitor*.

A *temporary migrant* resides in a country for an intentionally limited time which may vary from a few months (e.g. a *seasonal migrant*) to several years (e.g. a foreign housekeeper or a professional *expat*). Temporary migration is often *circular*, with same migrant returning to the host country several times. In the context of the international trade in services, the World Trade Organization refers to temporary migration to provide services abroad as the *movement of natural persons* (also called *Mode 4* of services trade), which can again vary from a stay of a few months to a few years.

Visitors are often characterized by *primary* purpose of the trip: VFR; holiday/vacation; business, education; conference/convention; other. Measuring the importance of any of these types of trips is not straightforward, as many travellers have multiple purposes for a trip, for example combining VFR with a sightseeing tour, establishing business contacts, or seeking medical treatment abroad.

Further reading: Anderson, B. and Blinder, S. "Who Counts as a Migrant? Definitions and their Consequences." Migration Observatory Briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, UK, 2015.

The effect of migration on travel: the role of relationship capital

Immigrants maintain links with the family and friends they leave behind. They also maintain sometimes links with people they know professionally in the home country: to do business with them or to share information and maintain networks. The strength of such relationships is referred to in the literature as relationship capital, which may reflect trust, reciprocity, etc. (see Background Information Box 2). As in the case for any type of capital, there is depreciation of relationship capital, in the present context due to the physical separation between the migrants and the people left behind. Communication through email, social networks and video chats reduces the rate of depreciation, but such virtual interaction not a perfect substitute for physically meeting face to face (F2F). Hence, the longer a migrants is abroad, the less the strength of a relationship (the lower the actual level of relationship capital). The microeconomic theory of a migrant's maintenance of relationship capital with the home country can be effectively summarised in a diagram. The case considered here is that of a migrant returning home after some time abroad to rebuild a relationship. A similar story can be told for friends, relatives or business contacts visiting the migrant in the host country. Although the focus is here exclusively on cross-border migration and travel, the theory can of course also be applied to migration within a country.

Background Information Box 2. Relationship Capital

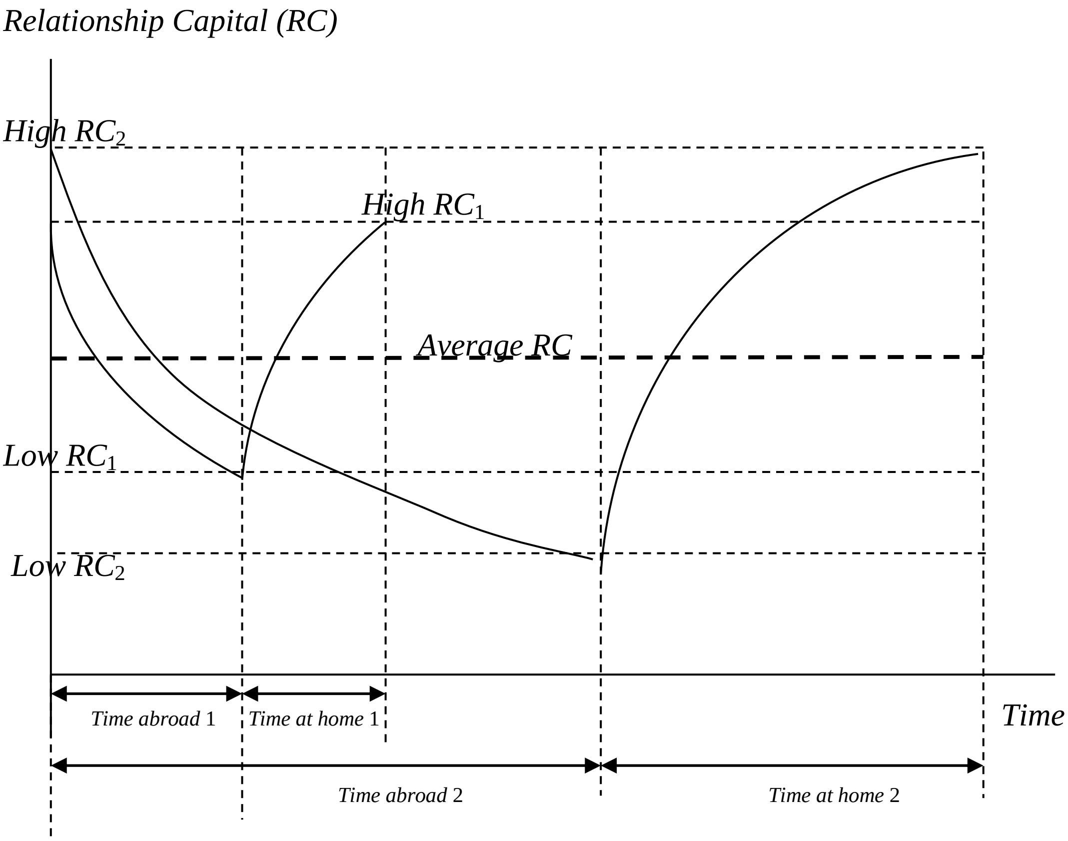
Relationship capital is a term used in economics, sociology and business studies. It refers to the strength of the mutually beneficial relationships between individuals or groups of individuals. As in the case of any other form of capital, such capital can be created by investment: through building relationships. However, if such relationships are not maintained through regular interaction and reciprocity, relationship capital will depreciate. Like financial capital, relationship capital yields a return to the owners: in the form of trust, co-operation and the sharing of resources. Communities benefit from the combined relationship capital that links community members. This is referred to as a community's *social capital*.

Further reading: Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Figure 1 depicts on the vertical axis relationship capital and on the horizontal axis time. Economic theory can derive an optimal average (steady-state) level of relationship capital with the people back home (labelled average RC in the figure), given the migrant's circumstances. When circumstances change, the optimal level may change of course. When migrants are abroad, RC declines. When they visit the home country, RC increases. Some migrants maintain the optimal level of RC by frequent short trips back home (this case is indicated by the subscript 1 in the figure). Others will travel less frequently but stay in the home country longer (indicated by subscript 2).

Following migration abroad, relationship capital depreciates initially very fast but at a slower rate once a migrant has been abroad for longer. Upon return to the home country, relationship capital is initially replenished at a fast rate, but the rate of appreciation is declining over time, consistent with the economist's notion of diminishing marginal returns in production. There is evidence from psychology and medicine to support the shapes of the drawn curves [2]. It can be shown that the optimal frequency at which a migrant visits the home country is inversely related to the distance between the two countries and to the travel cost. Not surprisingly, the trip frequency is in the case of VFR travel positively related to the psychological costs of living apart. When migrants make more trips, each trip becomes shorter but the aggregate time spent in the home country is increasing and the more so the less the home and host countries are culturally similar. Data on the VFR travel among New Zealand and UK citizens who migrated to Australia between 1 August 1999 and 31 July 2000 provided empirical support for this theory of relationship capital maintenance. [3].

Figure 1. Home country relationship capital depreciation and replenishment



Source: adapted from McCann, P., Poot, J. and Sanderson, L. "Migration, relationship capital and international travel: theory and evidence." *Journal of Economic Geography* 10:3 (2010): 361-387.

In the case of travel between the migrant's host and home countries for business-related reasons, the creation or maintaining of relationship capital has many economic benefits. Diaspora can be an important resource for businesses seeking opportunities abroad. They can act as "go-betweens" to build up trust with potential business partners. Diaspora are also an important source of information. Some information about conditions in a potential market can be easily sent by postal mail or transmitted electronically: brochures, reports, manuals, legal documents, etc. Such information is referred to as *codified* knowledge. Other information is more complex and much more difficult to express verbally. The latter type of knowledge, referred to as *tacit* knowledge, can only be effectively disseminated through F2F visits. The information gained through business travel enhances another form of capital, namely knowledge capital, of an organization. Business travel can boost productivity [4], partially through stimulating the diffusion of new technology [5]. The innovation effect of travel is not restricted to business travel: some research suggests that productivity is boosted by any type of inbound travel, even after accounting for reverse causality, i.e. cross-border travel being a function of productivity and income [6].

Empirical evidence of migration leading to tourism

A number of studies have shown that immigration boosts trade. Sufficient empirical evidence is available to conduct a meta-analysis of this relationship. A *meta-analysis* is a quantitative synthesis of the literature that yields a weighted average of past estimates, with more precise estimates having more weight. The overall conclusion of such a meta-analysis of the distribution of import and export elasticities across 48 studies that yielded some 300 estimates is that an increase in the number of immigrants by 1 percent increases the volume of international trade by about 0.15 percent [7]. Most foreign visitor arrivals will trigger local expenditures on accommodation, food, transportation and other expenditures. These expenditures, funded by the visitor's foreign currency, is of course a form of international trade in services. The level of such expenditures will depend on the nature of the visit and budget of the visitor. The expenditure may be expected to be less for VFR travellers who may stay, and have meals, in the host's home rather than stay in a hotel and dine out.

A comprehensive study of the impact of migration on the volume and economic impact of travel by purpose of trip has yet to be conducted, but some empirical evidence is available for tourism/vacationing. New Zealand research suggests that that the effect on tourism is several times stronger than the effect on merchandise trade [8]. Estimates of the impact of immigration on inbound tourism are available for Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom [9]. These estimates suggest that a 1 percent increase in the number of immigrants increases the number of inbound tourists by between 0.1 to 0.6 percent. However, the impact of this additional tourism triggered by immigrants on the balance of payments may not be positive if the effect on outbound trips is much larger than on inbound trips. New Zealand research suggests that this is indeed the case. Another interesting feature of the New Zealand study is that the impact of the country's own population living abroad, i.e. its diaspora, on tourism can also be calculated. New Zealand's diaspora indeed boost travel to and from New Zealand. However, the effect of diaspora on inbound tourism is less than that on outbound tourism. These results suggest that the impact of emigration and of immigration on tourism may be a mixed blessing, at least in the New Zealand case. Such results suggest that migration boosts travel, but that the effect on the difference between inbound and outbound visitors is negative: both immigrants and diaspora increase inbound travel by less than outbound travel. The effect of this on the international balance of payment is difficult to assess without data on expenditures of inbound and outbound tourists. If these expenditures are similar, immigration may have a negative impact on net revenue from international tourism. The meta-analysis mentioned above showed that such a negative impact may be country-specific if the evidence on merchandise trade can be extended to the case of tourism: in about half the countries considered, the impact of immigration on the trade balance was positive.

The impact of cross-border travel on international migration

Intensifying global economic integration boosts international business travel. This may lead to subsequent migration. Business travellers establish networks that may facilitate migration. To establish a foothold on foreign soil, a business will need to develop a network of contacts in that foreign country. F2F meetings are essential to establish a relationship built on trust and cooperation. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has been shown to lead to migration to the country where the investment is made, particularly migration of expat professionals who may take up leading roles in the foreign business venture. At the same time, diaspora are often an important means through which businesses establish foreign networks. Their location is an important determinant of the destination of FDI. Hence, migration, FDI and business travel are closely interrelated [10].

Similarly, travel for study abroad may lead to subsequent migration. Many educational institutions in developed countries attract foreign students as an important source of income. In 2012 at least 4 million students went abroad to study. Given the quest for global talent in the modern knowledge economy, these students are – once they have graduated – a desirable source for recruitment of highly skilled workers. Not only have they been trained in ways that are appropriate to the host country, they have also already to some extent assimilated in the host society. University graduates from abroad are therefore in several host countries given temporary residence permits (usually for 12 months) to find a job in the host country labour market. The rationale is that if they are successful in finding a job, they are likely to integrate well in the host society. Some governments, such as New Zealand, consider this "trial migration" an effective path to residence [11].

Finally, VFR travel and general tourism may also lead to subsequent migration. The standard microeconomic model of migration emphasises that labour migrants are willing to incur the costs of migration, which can be both pecuniary and non-pecuniary, in order to reap an anticipated net gain in earnings, taking into account also the amenities and the cost of living in the destination. A cost-benefit calculation of the net benefit of migration is facilitated by the availability of various types of information about the potential host destination. Much of this information is available through the internet, or through a network of contacts, but actual on-site "fact finding" through a personal visit yields additional information and valuable insights. Moreover, people who decide to migrate after VFR travel to a foreign destination (or after their friends and relatives visit them in the home country) can benefit in a number of ways (networking, emotional and financial support) from their friends and relatives in the host society. This is one of the reasons for the empirically often confirmed hypothesis of migrants following "well-trodden paths".

Is ICT a substitute for migration-related travel?

Given that the video and sound quality of online interaction is improving all the time and the cost is declining, it would seem that virtual meetings can become a very effective substitute for travel, which remains the much more costly option, both privately and in terms of public cost (resulting from the ecological footprint of travel). We see indeed a huge growth in video conferencing. Additionally, there is increasingly an opportunity in the education sector and in conferences to participate through online access from distant locations. For example, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are increasingly available as a substitute for conventional university classes. However, much of the research to date suggests that travel and ICT are complements, not substitutes [12].

F2F meetings are necessary to build trust and co-operation. Meeting in person can also boost creativity. It was earlier noted that F2F interaction is essential for the transmission of tacit knowledge, even though codified knowledge can be easily transmitted electronically. Of course, ICT continues to evolve and it is possible that virtual F2F interaction eventually becomes a very similar reality to that of in situ personal interaction (although virtual interaction will never be a substitute for pleasurable gatherings in which meals and drinks are shared). Even where ICT-based communication is preferred due to its cost advantage, online contact is often enhanced by an initial F2F meeting. Additionally, even when the need for F2F interaction in each business or personal connection is reduced, the number of active contacts any individual has in business and social networks (for example, through LinkedIn and Facebook respectively) is much larger on average than it was before the internet era. Hence the total number of cross-border trips may continue to rise, particularly because the real cost of air travel continues to decline.

This discussion suggests that the positive association between migration and travel will not weaken, even though the technology to communicate by means of a "virtual reality" continues to improve. There is as yet very little direct evidence on this but a case study of visits between locally born and immigrant residents of Israel and their relatives abroad shows that an increasing frequency of maintaining communication at a distance is associated with increased travel frequency, i.e. communication technologies and migration induced travel are complements [13]. However, this study also suggested that the choice of communication technology matters: when people communicated with their relatives abroad via phone or email, they tended to travel more to visit them, but when they used online social network apps, they tended to travel less. Overall, these results suggest that as the global number of migrants, and consequently people's international networks, increases, the volume of migration-induced travel will continue to increase as well, even though the number of trips associated with a particular person-to-person link may decline as a result of further advancement of communication technologies.

LIMITATIONS AND GAPS

As the distinction between international travel and migration is becoming increasingly blurred in the emerging patterns of trans-national mobility, the available statistics may no longer adequately reflect the status quo. In many countries, population statistics are based on the *de jure* definition – which counts people based on their usual residence – and underestimate the economic demand generated by non-residents who are nonetheless part of the *de facto* population (the population actually observed at a particular place). Discrepancies between de jure and de facto populations vary seasonally and spatially.

Economic research shows that the growing international mobility of people, either in the form of temporary or permanent migration, or in the form of short-term travel has major economic benefits through the additional trade in services, the greater efficiency in the allocation of labour, the strengthening of networks with diaspora and transmission of information generally. However, the interrelationships between travel and migration in the era of growing cross-border flows remain under-researched. These interrelationship and the impact of further technological and institutional changes in the transportation and ICT sectors offer much promise for future research.

SUMMARY AND POLICY ADVICE

Global economic integration and large demographic, economic and institutional differences across countries suggest that the number of people living abroad will continue to increase. At the same time, technological change and aviation industry deregulation are contributing to declining real costs of long-distance travel and growing passenger movements. The ongoing relationships between immigrants and their family, friends and business contacts back home can boost travel. Conversely, tourism and business trips may trigger subsequent migration. This self-reinforcing spiral of growing mobility may be slowed down by technologies that make virtual interaction an effective substitute for meeting-in-person interaction, with potentially large environmental benefits. However, research to date suggests that information and communication technologies often complement rather than substitute for migration-induced travel.

The growing complexity of international mobility is clearly offering challenges for a wide spectrum of policy domains, including the monitoring of international travel and the required documentation and visas for travel. Governments should for example consider reintroducing statistics on the de facto population, perhaps aided by the georeferenced ‘Big Data’ generated by mobile phones etc.

Additionally, governments need to become aware of the implications of the increasing volume and complexity of international migration for public funding of health and education services, and for taxation. Given the difficulties in achieving further trade liberalisation in a multilateral setting (the stalled Doha round of trade negotiations) and the popularity of bilateral or regional agreements, it is likely that the implications of increasing mobility for taxation and social security funding arrangements will also be made on a bilateral or regional basis. For example, countries can share in the pension payments to individuals based on the share of working life a person has resided in the respective countries. However, public systems may no longer be compatible with the observed mobility patterns. An increase in private provision, particularly for highly mobile professional workers (often referred to as international ‘talent’), by means of global insurance schemes that cover health care, income protection and retirement, is likely.

More generally, the growth in cross-border mobility demands revision of policies, laws and regulations regarding immigrant settlement and integration. Currently these are still predominantly focussed on conventional worker migration. The internationalisation of higher education and the growing incidence of cross border retirement and residencies in more than one country also necessitate an assessment at what this means for the public sector.

Finally, the presence of a large number of temporary migrants and transnationals in a host country demand a fresh look at the meaning and requirements for citizenship, the notion of cultural identity and policies that aim to encourage immigrant integration. Increasingly, migrants may be recruited on a “trial” basis, with successful employment facilitated by a temporary work or study permit providing a path to permanent residency.

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Competing interests

The IZA World of Labor project is committed to the *IZA Guiding Principles of Research Integrity*. The author declares to have observed these principles.

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