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## International Migration Post-COVID

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## Introduction

The crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic raises the specter of an outpouring of migrants worldwide, as it is assumed that economic crises lead to migration. Moreover, international migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is driven by a myriad of factors, and its predictability is quite limited. Given the complexities shaping the world, plus the pandemic, the prospects of international migration are likely to be large.

More than half of developing countries have experienced large migration rates resulting from a mixed set of factors, most of which are related to country differentiated crises, such as earthquakes, civil wars, foreign intervention, military coups and financial crises, among others. Moreover, global patterns, such as the 2009 economic recession and the early 2000s democratic transitions have also further contributed to conditions that make people prone to emigrate.

This note shows that the severity of migration is often related to a combination of global problems and country-specific crises. Although there are intangible factors at work that make predicting migration limited, we find some important insights relating to political stability and economic growth that put the post-COVID period into perspective.

This analysis demonstrates trends in migration and statistical correlations with key economic, social, and economic indicators. It identifies the characteristics of countries with migration dependence and identifies possible triggers of post-COVID migration patterns. Specifically analyzing migration, economic, political and social data for the 2000 to 2019 period, this report shows that:

- Most migration has exhibited growth between 2.5% and 6.25%, which is as much as twice demographic growth.
- Countries with higher migration growth are among the most fragile, with low income, and represent over 14 million migrants. In 2019, 21 million migrants came from nine fragile countries.
- Economic growth, particularly negative per capita economic growth, is a common denominator of migration. Five years after the global recession, migration growth between 2010-2015 was 4%.
- Accompanied with growth, migration is more pronounced in countries with incomes below US\$6,000, where 60% of migrants come from.
- Migration growth post-COVID may result in a combination of patterns similar to the 2015 and 2019 periods:
  - Human mobility will increase due to the negative economic growth in 2020, less economically competitive regions, and greater political difficulties.

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<sup>1</sup> Manuel Orozco with Jessica Spanswick. Center for Migration and Economic Stabilization, Creative Associates International. October 2020

- Migration may increase by more than 4% from 2019 levels, similar to the increase following the global recession.

Table 1: Characteristics of Migration in the 21st Century

	2005	2010	2015	2019
<b>Income above \$6,000 a year</b>				
<b>Migrant population</b>	50,359,595	86,296,757	101,643,628	112,923,716
<b>Share of home country population</b>	13%	14%	17%	17%
<b>Number of countries</b>	77	100	101	94
<b>Share of all migrants</b>	27.7%	41.1%	43.2%	42.9%
<b>Income under \$6,000 a year</b>				
<b>Migrant population</b>	131,220,091	123,644,845	133,666,888	150,503,770
<b>Share of home country population</b>	11%	11%	11%	13%
<b>Number of countries</b>	131	108	107	114
<b>Share of all migrants</b>	72.3%	58.9%	56.8%	57.1%

Source: UNDESA

### ***Large-scale migration as consequence of large-scale crisis***

International migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has grown in importance for many reasons, including the foreign labor force contribution to migrant host and home countries' economies, as well as the increasing irregular entry that has occurred. The latter point is a consequence of key development challenges that have brought global attention.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, international migration trends from 131 developing countries show that in more than half, human cross-border mobility growth exceeded demographic growth. During the 2000 to 2005 period, 51 countries exhibited year-on-year growth in international migration between 2.5% and 6.25%. However, 23 countries experienced over 6% growth in international migration rates, which equates to 15 million migrants, or two and a half times the home countries' average demographic growth.

These "high migration growth" countries are among the most fragile, politically less stable and with low per capita income. These high migration countries also exhibited more social protests than other countries. Table 2 below shows a summary of key indicators associated with migration.

Table 2: Indicators of migration and political and economic trends

	Indicator	2005	2010	2013	2015	2019
<b>Migration Growth under 2.5%</b>	Migrants	59,620,884	46,203,122	95,895,427	63,828,545	100,913,893
	Number of countries	57	46	78	52	84
	GDP per capita	1,817	2,184	2,148	2,699	1,823
	GDP per capita growth	5	4	2	2	2
	Protests Year Before	5	3	34	180	45
	Fragility*	58	84	87	83	80
	Governance**	(0.38)	(0.39)	(0.69)	(0.34)	(0.20)

Migration Growth between 2.5% and 6.25%	Migrants	56,524,872	63,112,064	11,984,811	55,432,617	25,562,725
	Number of countries	51	43	6	43	23
	GDP per capita	2,024	2,283	2,848	2,054	1,972
	GDP per capita growth	3	3	2	0	1
	Protests Year Before	12	12	27	41	16
	Fragility*	57	84	80	88	88
	Governance**	(0.37)	(0.52)	0.10	(0.55)	(0.53)
Migration Over 6.25% Growth	Migrants	15,074,335	14,329,659	1,310,203	14,405,726	21,027,152
	Number of countries	23	19	9	12	7
	GDP per capita	1,671	1,820	1,851	1,486	346
	GDP per capita growth	2	4	4	1	1
	Protests Year Before	12	9	17	16	5
	Fragility*	51	87	93	96	96
	Governance**	(0.59)	(0.79)	0.19	(1.10)	(1.78)

Source: World Bank Development Indicators; Index of Fragility, Fund for Peace; Harvard Social Protest dataset; United Nations Division UNDESA. \*The Fund for Peace uses the Fragile State Index in a scale from 10 to 120. Countries above 90 are regarded as dangerously fragile. \*\*Governance indicators measure political stability and absence of violence in a scale of -2.5 to 2.5. Countries falling between -2.5 to -1.0 were coded as politically unstable or violent.

Over the last 20 years, most of these countries experiencing high migration patterns are also societies that demonstrated convulsive internal political strife. From 2000-2005, for example, Djibouti's government faced a coup, followed by a pivot to full multi-party politics and electoral competition, and then an election in which incumbent President Guellel was the sole candidate. Similarly, in the same time period, Liberia succumbed to a Second Civil War, deposed its leader, and elected the first woman head of state in Africa as president. For both Djibouti and Liberia, out-migration exploded amid political instability.

The following five years for both countries continued to demonstrate similar patterns. The International Criminal Court began its trial against former President Charles Taylor, and violent fighting broke out between Christian and Muslim groups in Liberia. In Djibouti, the 2008 parliamentary elections were boycotted by all three main opposition parties, leaving the ruling coalition to win all 65 elections. In turn, 26,171 Djiboutians and over half a million Liberians fled.

Catalysts in large out-migration countries cannot, however, be boiled down to a single causal event. In this same decade, Djibouti, for example, also played the role of a strategic station for the U.S. and its allies in attacks on Afghanistan, engaged in regional conflict with neighboring Eritrea, and experienced a major drought that led to extreme hunger. Similarly, Liberia experienced international sanctions from the United Nations Security Council, lived through a declared state of emergency, and hosted both Nigerian peacekeepers and U.S. troops.

Finally, economic trouble also often correlates with high out-migration in developing countries. Years of civil war left Liberia with unpayable debt, to the point at which creditor countries pardoned \$1.2 billion of unpaid debt. Likewise, civil war in the 1990s led Djibouti into a harsh reckoning of fiscal policy in the early 2000s.

### ***Migration after the global economic crisis: Insights from developing countries***

The severity of the global economic crisis of 2009 had effects on economic performance but did not affect out-migration in a similar way. Again, as in other periods, existing problems in some countries

were exacerbated by the global recession resulting in increased migration. Overall, the 2009 global recession shows that the recovery was slow but steady.

In developing countries where migration occurred after the global recession period, declines in GDP per capita during the post-2009 period correlated with increased migration years later. For the most part, migration growth between 2010 and 2013 was 4% on average for countries with earnings under \$6,000 and exhibited the highest growth between 2000 and 2019 (see Table 3).<sup>2</sup>

Table 3: Per capita GDP and international migration growth

Country Name	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<b>Per Capita Economic growth indicators</b>							
<b>Fragile and conflict affected situations</b>	3.2	0.4	1.9	-1.7	5.2	1.4	-1.1
<b>Low income</b>	3.6	2.1	3.0	0.6	-0.2	3.1	2.4
<b>Lower middle income</b>	2.6	3.2	5.2	3.2	3.5	3.9	4.2
<b>Middle income</b>	4.3	1.1	6.2	4.8	4.0	3.9	3.3
<b>OECD members</b>	-0.5	-4.1	2.3	1.3	0.7	0.9	1.4
<b>World</b>	0.6	-2.9	3.1	1.9	1.3	1.5	1.6
<b>Migration indicators of growth</b>							
<b>Migration from low income countries</b>			3.0			5.0	
<b>Migration from other countries</b>			2.0			3.0	

Source: UNDESA, World Bank Development Indicators

But again, during this global recession period, the countries with migration growth include places already facing political problems, such as those in the Northern Triangle of Central America, Moldova, Nigeria, Indonesia, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The global recession affected their already tense situations and influenced people's decision to migrate.

Take a closer look at Moldova for example. Between 2005 and 2010, 827,763 Moldovans emigrated. The following five-year period saw that number grow to well over 900,000. Between 2000 and 2008, leading up to the global recession, the Moldovan economy was quite strong, showing an average growth rate of 6.3% fueled in part by migrant remittances. Though the economy was growing, inflation was high, a 2007 drought threatened stability, and a Russian ban on Moldovan wines showed worrisome signs for future growth.

Just before the peak of the global recession in 2009, sitting President of Moldova Vladimir Voronin resigned after a political coalition organized, and parliament experienced volatility. Moldova was hit with a 13.8-point decrease in GDP from 2008 to 2009 from the recession, undoubtedly affecting later migration.

At the same time, however, democracy scores also deteriorated, and government corruption remained rampant. Though the economic turmoil in Moldova certainly played a role in the ensuing high out-migration, it would be foolish to deem the economy the sole independent variable. Rather, political instability, democratic backsliding, and the economy likely together affected migration rates. The shift in this migration is also geographic, as migrants increased their mobility among European Union countries

<sup>2</sup> The \$6,000 figure as an income threshold has been commonly used by the [World Bank](#).

rather than Russia. The percent of migration to Russia declined from 40% in 2005 to 29% in 2019, shifting toward Europe.

Somewhat similarly, Honduras experienced a political coup in the middle of the recession, and Haiti was decimated by a historic earthquake in 2010. This confluence of economic downfall, political instability, and external factors such as natural disasters also affected the following years' migration.

The table below shows results of an analysis of migration patterns and economic, political and social indicators, comparing 2013 and 2015 with 2010. They indicate that a decline in growth and political governance and an increase in the labor force led to increases in migration.

The trend in 2015, more distant from the recession, also points to increases in social protests that correlate with migration. That is, unsatisfied demands lead people to emigrate.

Table 4: Statistical determinants of growth of international migration post-2009 recession

	2013	2015
(Constant)	-18.275	-11.695
Growth in Per Capita GDP (lagged)	-.011	-.072*
Democratic governance (lagged)	-.224**	-.154
Increases in the labor force (lagged)	11.418***	9.124***
Social protests (lagged)	.104	.182

R<sup>2</sup>: 0.5; 0.6. Data applied to developing countries with per capita income under \$6,000

***The post-COVID period: Is a storm in international migration to be expected?***

The COVID-19 pandemic is possibly exacerbating economic, social, and political factors related to international migration that have developed over the past 20 years.

First, before the pandemic, there were already increasing social protests in several places, particularly after 2015. Between 2000 and 2019, the average number of protests almost tripled from 16 to more than 50. Central America is an illustration of this pattern, as Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua had a large spate of social protests demanding political change.

Second, political conditions in many countries were deteriorating. Venezuela, Syria, Haiti, are illustrations of a number of countries suffering severe political challenges.

Third, while economic growth improved after 2015, the extent of economic competitiveness has remained low among developing countries, with average economic competitiveness in 2019 like that of 2013.

More importantly, developing countries in the 2010-2015 period following the Great Recession of 2009 did not exhibit negative per capita growth. The IMF and other international institutions are projecting systemic negative economic growth in 2020 with slow recovery into 2021. The projected decline is a

global -4% with -6% in advanced economies and -2% in developing countries. For reference, in 2009 growth in developing countries was +2%.<sup>3</sup>

The problems now, therefore, are more pronounced in 2019 and 2020 than previous periods in terms of the intensity of conditions and the systemic wide impact, some of which may lead to migration. Looking at IMF projections on growth as well as other indicators shows that developing countries are more constrained. With borders closed for much of 2020, expectations of migrating may also increase moving forward.

Using 2019 migration distribution against several social and economic indicators shows again that declines in economic competitiveness,<sup>4</sup> projected economic impacts in 2020, and an increase in social protests may lead to a similar increase in migration above percentages from previous years.

The significance of widespread social protests in 2019 that were stymied by the pandemic in 2020, combined with the international recession in 2020, should not be underestimated. Of all indicators, the most concerning is the decline in growth because it is projected to affect 80% of all countries, rich and poor. Therefore, that a 1% decline in growth will yield a 4% increase in migration is concerning considering that the global projection drop in economic growth is -4%.

Table 5: Regression results of migration determinants in developing countries 2019

	B coefficient
(Constant)	-16.899
Governance	.149
Increase in labor force	11.294***
Social protest	-.061*
Economic growth in 2020	-.041*
Economic competitiveness	-.153**

R<sup>2</sup> : 0.38

The prospect of out-migration above historic numbers occurs at a time where the contagion has affected migrants in the host countries. Although these migrants continued sending money in 2020, the possibility of remitting at similar levels may not be the same in 2021, as the economic recovery is expected to be slower and migrants' resources may have waned.

Moreover, the vast majority of migrant workers come from developing countries in which the average family earns less than \$6,000. Migrants' countries of origin are facing structural constraints, including strong dependence on few external factors, high levels of informal economies coexisting with rural areas, and less democratic societies.

<sup>3</sup> IMF. World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A Long and Difficult Ascent. October 2020

<sup>4</sup> As measured through the index of economic complexity.

Table 6: Low-income countries and migration characteristics

Indicators	Per capita Income			
	Under \$6,000 (48%)	\$6,000 -15,000 (21%)	\$15,000-\$30,000 (13%)	Over \$30,000 (18%)
Average COVID-19 cases (as of 10/05) <sup>a</sup>	136,885	369,058	76,949	379,041
Total COVID-19 cases (as of 10/05)	10,403,272	12,547,957	1,538,982	10,992,200
Average COVID-19 deaths (as of 10/05)	444	2,725	1,586	4,157
Total number of deaths due to COVID-19 (as of 10/05)	31,508	89,928	30,132	108,083
COVID-19 cases per 1 M (as of 10/05)	62	128	455	895
COVID-19 deaths per 1 M (as of 10/05)	225	2,329	1,385	2,028
COVID-19 tests per 1 M (as of 10/05)	29,591	104,704	198,574	399,707
Rural population <sup>b</sup>	54.57	31.9	35.41	14.18
Rank in the world in economic complexity <sup>c</sup> (highest means low complexity)	165	100	78	45
Six activities as share of GDP <sup>b</sup>	31.7	18.8	.	.
Remittances (% of GDP) <sup>b</sup>	7.1	2.7	1.3	0.5
Total number of migrant hosts <sup>d</sup>	48,071,627	45,744,991	27,716,203	141,872,107
Total number of outmigration <sup>d</sup>	124,322,421	72,555,639	11,922,900	27,612,534
Democracy Index (scale 4 to 8, least to most democratic) <sup>e</sup>	4.66	5.81	6.53	7.9

Source: <sup>a</sup> Coronavirus cases: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>; UNDESA; ; <sup>b</sup>. World Bank Development Indicators; <sup>c</sup>. The Atlas Of Economic Complexity; <sup>d</sup>. UNDESA; <sup>e</sup>. Democracy Index, Economist Intelligence Unit.

Table 7: Remittance flows from sender countries in 2020

Country/Region	Migrants in 2019	Distr.	Rem. 2019	Growth 2020	Volume 2020
U.S. and Canada	58,647,822	22%	202,686,872,832	5%	212,821,216,474
European Union	46,930,000	17%	133,046,550,000	-12%	117,080,964,000
GCC	45,635,541	17%	90,358,371,180	-13%	78,611,782,927
Russia and Kazakhstan	15,346,809	6%	26,519,285,952	-12%	23,336,971,638
Australia and NZ	8,618,009	3%	13,030,429,608	-25%	9,772,822,206
South Africa	4,224,256	2%	3,421,647,360	-30%	2,395,153,152
Hong Kong, China	2,942,254	1%	4,660,530,336	5%	4,893,556,853
Japan	2,498,891	1%	3,958,243,344	5%	4,156,155,511
Other	86,798,523	32%	93,742,404,840	-30%	65,619,683,388
<b>WORLD</b>	<b>271,642,105</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>571,424,335,452</b>	<b>-9%</b>	<b>518,688,306,148</b>

Source: Central Bank data and author's estimates.

Central American countries will likely be among those leading out-migration, given sustained complications in their societies. They are examples of countries earning incomes below \$6,000 as described in Table 6 and with flows of remittances, mostly from the U.S.

Overall, the main determinants that drive migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras include receiving remittances, poor economic conditions at the household and macroeconomic level, and victimization.

A 2019 study by Creative Associates showed that 25% of people from these countries had considered emigrating. Generally, people who have considered migration reported experiencing tough economic



situations and have been victimized to a greater extent than those who had not considered emigrating. They also have larger transnational family ties than those who have not thought about migrating.<sup>5</sup>

Across the region, the individual experiences and characteristics associated with thoughts of migrating include: being young, living in a low-income household, being a low-skilled worker, being unemployed, being a skilled worker with at least a high school education, having an unfavorable outlook on the future economic situation, having been victimized, and having transnational ties. Youth are twice as likely to consider migrating than their older counterparts.

The case of Nicaragua is another example in which the political crisis has forced thousands of people to move abroad. In a December 2019 survey, 9% of Nicaraguan households said they had a relative leave the country since the ongoing political crisis began in April 2018. This amounts to 140,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Many of these individuals have fled to Costa Rica, Spain, and the United States. In turn, many have sent money to their relatives upon arrival.

The outflow of migrants has translated in money sent and turned the country's only positive macroeconomic indicator as the economy has continued to decline because of the political crisis. As of 2019, remittances came to carry 14% of the country's GDP, up from 11% in 2018. In 2020, remittances will represent 15% of GDP.

### ***Economic stabilization as prevention and mitigation***

The context shaping future migration is a drastic one.

As in previous moments, countries experiencing complex, severe problems are more likely to migrate. Given the severity of the impact, migration will show higher growth than previous periods, that is above 5%.

The impact of the pandemic in externally dependent and highly informal economies will be more severe because they also are the ones exhibiting the lowest economic complexity.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to introduce a systemic economic stabilization approach that taps into all economic sectors beyond economic enclaves (such as tourism or agriculture) and targets people at risk of migrating, that is those largely based in less economically competitive sectors. This approach will also contribute to mitigating the spate of social protests, which were already seen in 2020 in some countries despite the pandemic.

Entrepreneurship modernization is necessary to help societies adapt to the changing dynamics in the post-pandemic period, which have deepened the emphasis of working in the knowledge and digital economies. Helping these businesses to adapt to the new post-COVID globalized world is essential as it helps maximize the economic recovery from the pandemic and advance into a more competitive environment.

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<sup>5</sup> "Saliendo Adelante: Why migrants risk it all," [www.saliendo-adelante.com](http://www.saliendo-adelante.com)

<sup>6</sup> Orozco, Manuel. Based on survey with 1,010 individuals conducted by Borge y Asociados, December 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Orozco, Manuel. *About the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the region*. August 2020. Creative Associates.

One area of attention is integrating businesses further to the digital economy, such as through internet-based data storing and processing across all economic sectors and intermediaries (such as money, information, or connectivity). Skills training and technical and financial support should be aligned to strengthen workers and businesses in the digital and knowledge economies, ensuring that microenterprises are accessing digital:

- Financial services* (POST use, banking access, clients with digital wallets),
- Management operations and activities* (manage purchase orders online, home delivery of merchandise through online orders)
- Manufacturing* (use of accessible and available technology to maximize productivity, including 3D printing)
- Identification* to enhance labor and business connectivity and networking capacity

Appendix A: Countries with high migration growth during the respective period

2005	2010	2013	2015	2019
Algeria	Myanmar	Liberia	Central African	Burundi
Argentina	Algeria	Bhutan	Republic	Eritrea
Benin	Benin	Chad	Sudan	South Sudan
Bolivia	Bolivia	Channel Islands	Burundi	Syrian Arab Republic
Cambodia	Cambodia	Marshall Islands	Eritrea	Myanmar
Central African	Central African	Mauritania	South Sudan	Venezuela, RB
Republic	Republic	Sierra Leone	Syrian Arab Republic	Gambia, The
Comoros	Comoros	Tuvalu	Eswatini	
Djibouti	Djibouti	Vanuatu	Namibia	
Ecuador	Ecuador		Nepal	
Lao PDR	Lao PDR		Papua New Guinea	
Liberia	Liberia		Rwanda	
Madagascar	Madagascar		Zambia	
Maldives	Mongolia			
Mongolia	Niger			
Myanmar	Paraguay			
Niger	Peru			
Paraguay	Sudan			
Peru	Togo			
Romania	Zimbabwe			
Sudan				
Togo				
Venezuela, RB				
Zimbabwe				