



What are the 'root causes' of migration?

The term 'root causes of migration' is fuzzy and contested but has been widely used since the 1980s. We provide a precise definition of the 'root causes of migration', examine how they work, and discuss whether the concept is useful.

'Root causes' typically represent hardships that are important to address in order to improve people's lives, regardless of their effects on migration.

Managing migration by 'tackling the root causes' can be ethically and politically flawed because it rests on the idea of migration as a problem to be solved.

It is also unlikely to work because 'root causes' make up only part of the drivers of migration, and even have contradictory impacts on migration.

Jessica Hagen-Zanker
ODI

Jørgen Carling
Peace Research Institute Oslo



People who say it is hard to earn a living where they live are more likely to want to migrate

Camille Casavan for MIGNEX, Batu (Ethiopia).

The idea of tackling the so-called ‘root causes of migration’ has been around in policy circles for decades. In Europe, root cause approaches once again gained prominence around the time of the migration crisis of 2015, with political narratives and a string of policy measures putting root causes approaches forward as a key measure to reduce migration.

A case in point is the 2015 European Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) which funds development projects, aiming to ‘contribute to better migration management as well as addressing the root causes of destabilisation, forced displacement and irregular migration, in particular by promoting resilience, economic and equal opportunities, security and development, and addressing human rights abuses’.¹

This Policy Brief draws on five years of critical engagement with the concept of ‘root causes’ and the relevance of this policy term on migration drivers in 25 local communities in ten countries across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. It is based on research documented in the MIGNEX Background Paper *The multi-level determination of migration processes*.²

What are root causes?

As a foundation for examining ‘root causes, we propose a precise definition – to our knowledge the first formally stated:

Root causes of migration are widely experienced hardships, to which migration is a possible response, that are perceived to be persistent, immediately threatening, or both.

There are several points to note about the definition and its components.

First, we define ‘root causes’ on the concept’s own terms as proposed by the policy community, with the aim to make its logic clear. This is not an endorsement, but rather a necessary step towards assessing whether, when, or how, the concept is analytically valuable.

Second, the definition deliberately spans the problematic divide between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration and covers various forms of hardship.

Third, many adversities are *not* ‘root causes’, according to our definition. They include hardships that are likely to pass, or that are particular to individuals, such as the death of a spouse, or an accident resulting in disability.

Fourth, many other influences affect whether ‘root causes’ actually result in migration aspirations. For instance, people’s higher levels of trust in society make it more likely that they try to address their grievances locally, rather than by wanting to migrate.³

More generally, ‘root causes’ only influence whether people have migration aspirations – that is, whether they see migration as desirable

or necessary – and make preparations to migrate. Whether someone actually migrates depends on many other factors, including policy measures that restrict migration.

Perhaps the biggest challenge with the term ‘root causes’ is that it stems from seeing migration as a problem. Migration can be a problem, not least for migrants. Many of those who seek security or livelihoods elsewhere would often have preferred to remain at home if they could. But for others this is not the case, with migration being a rite of passage, adventure, personal growth or opportunity.

Root causes can be measured

Our analysis draws on a survey of more than 13,000 young adults. We used the data to create measures of root causes in four domains:

- Livelihoods and poverty
- Governance and public services
- Security and conflict
- Environmental hazards and stresses

Within these domains we consider specific variables that capture personal experiences or perceptions (e.g. being discontent with public services) as well as collective experiences at the community level (e.g. the share of people who’ve been asked to pay a bribe).

The local communities differ greatly in many of these respects. As an example, the share of people who have been asked or expected to pay a bribe varies from 2% in São Nicolau and Boa Vista (Cabo Verde), to 38% of respondents in Shahrake Mahdia (Afghanistan), Ekpoma (Nigeria) and Boffa (Guinea) (see map).

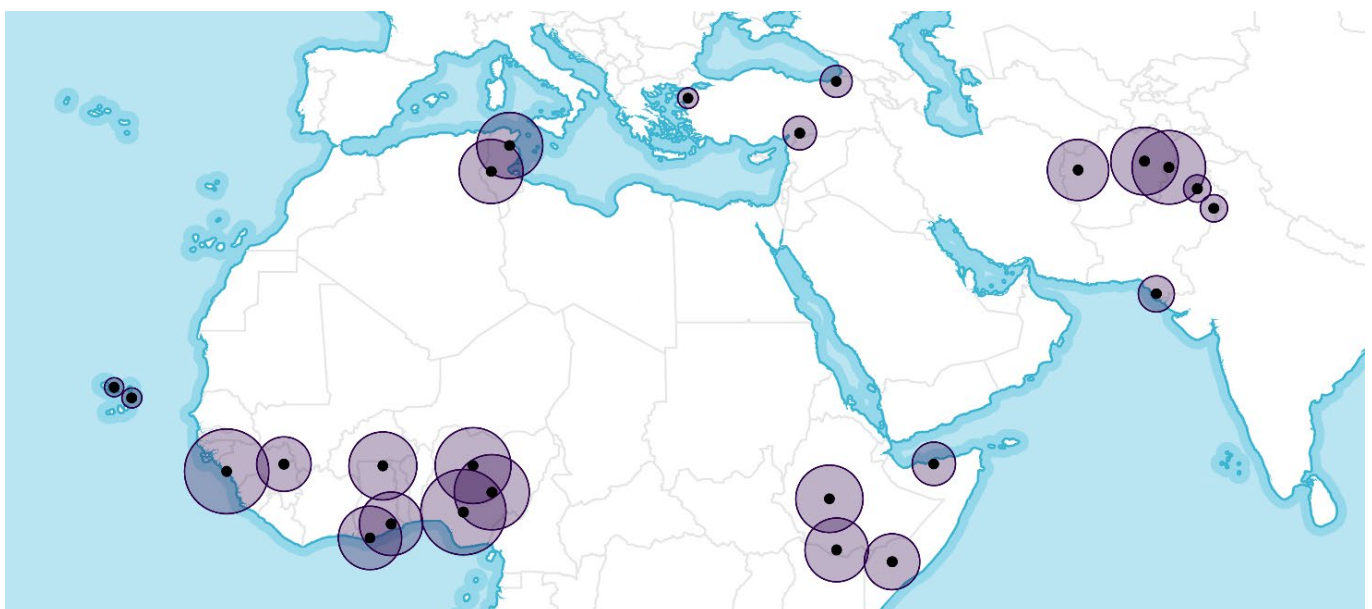
Some root causes matter more than others

Using the MIGNEX data, we tested whether ‘root causes’ explain whether people wish to migrate or have started preparations to do so.

We found that some hardships matter more than others. For instance, people are more likely to want to leave communities if they see limited opportunities to earn a living and feed a family, and where corruption is widespread. People are also more likely to want to leave if they distrust government institutions and are discontent with public services.

Levels of poverty play the opposite role. People who are poorer, or live in poorer communities, are both *less able* to leave and *less likely* to want to.

On the other hand, safety, security and environmental issues, are much less relevant hardships in explaining migration aspirations, in contrast to the attention they receive in media and political discourses.



Payment of bribes varies widely across research areas

Circles are proportional to the share of respondents who have been asked or expected to pay a bribe, within the research area during the past year, ranging from 2% to 38%. Data source: MIGNEX Survey.

Many factors matter, all at once

‘Root causes’ provide only part of the explanation for migration. People have different personalities, different appetite for risk, and different ambitions in life. All of this influences whether someone wishes to migrate.

What also matters is knowing how migration works, from own experience or that of others in the community who have migrated.

And while we found some general trends, we also saw contradictory patterns. For example, environmental hazards and stresses increased migration aspirations in some areas, decreased it in others, and had no effect in most. There is not one consistent set of determinants of migration that holds universally.

‘Tackling root causes’ is not a viable migration management strategy

Decades on, ‘tackling root causes’ is still a popular policy idea among politicians who seek to address what they deem unwanted migration. Our research demonstrates the shortcomings of such an approach.

- ‘Root causes’ are a meaningful label for *some* of the drivers of *some* forms of migration. They typically represent hardships that are important to address in order to improve people’s lives, regardless of the effects on migration.
- ‘Root causes’ are never the only causes. And many other factors that influence migration are often outside of the policymaker’s

Notes

¹ European Union (2015) The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. Strategic orientation document. European Union, Brussels

² This policy brief is based on research documented in Carling, J., Caso, N., Hagen-Zanker, J. and Rubio, M. (2023) The multi-level determination of migration processes. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at mignex.org/d061.

³ Carling, J., Caso, N., Hagen-Zanker, J and Vagas-Silva, C. (2023) Migration and alternative responses to dissatisfaction. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at mignex.org/d062.

Further reading



Carling, J. Caso, N. Hagen-Zanker, J. and Rubio, M. (2023) The multi-level determination of migration processes. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo.

www.mignex.org/d061.

control. They include a person’s gender, and risk attitude as well as the flow of information between migrants and their communities of origin.

- Managing migration by ‘tackling the root causes’ is unlikely to work because ‘root causes’ make up only part of the drivers, and even have contradictory impacts on migration. It can also be ethically and politically flawed because it rests on the idea of migration as a problem to be solved.
- The determinants of migration are context specific. Targeted policies are more likely to be effective in improving lives and preventing migration that is unwanted on the part of potential migrants.

So, let’s look at migration differently. Rather than restricting ourselves to the narrow sets of factors that are root causes, let’s consider the broader set of drivers that influence migration across different communities.

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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration-Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018-2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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