

International Migration, Transnationalism, and Development: Reflecting on Trends, Empirical Findings, and Theoretical Formulations

This presentation will reflect on main trends, empirical findings, and theoretical formulations of international migration, transnationalism, and development since the 1990s when the world has entered a new phase of hyperglobalization. Scholarly research often divides international migrations into two broad categories: political and economic. While a detectably immediate threat to life of an individual in her/his country of origin defines political migration, a lack thereof puts everyone else in the category of economic migration. Underlying the political category is a moral call for helping refugees and asylees based on the Declaration of Universal Human Rights of the United Nations that is enshrined in international legal systems. The economic category, in contrast, makes a general assumption that all other migrants are motivated by economic interests, implying that individual migrants' voluntary choices can be accomplished in the open market and that their movements back and forth are market-driven. However, putting all migrants, except for refugees and asylees, into a single category makes it analytically difficult to distinguish between—for instance—those motivated by actual economic opportunities and those driven by varieties of noneconomic motives (such as marriage, retirement, military deployment abroad, and so forth). Moreover, such conceptualization leads to a normative differentiation between economic migrants—those with desirable skills migrating through legal channels versus those deemed liabilities or burdens for the host country. Professor Min Zhou makes an argument that, although many contemporary international migrants may have been driven by the economic interests of seeking better employment opportunities and life chances, the processes of their immigration, resettlement, and transnationalism in the context of global capitalism are shaped by the intersection of a range of noneconomic factors, including migration histories, cultures, networks, and state policies in both sending and receiving countries, and that these processes lead to divergent patterns and outcomes of social transformation in host and home societies.