

Theories concerning unskilled foreign migrant workers in Thailand

Wanwadee Poonpokin¹

International migration theories applied in this paper help to explain clearly the origins, persistence of labourers in destination areas, and factors related to migrants. The author presents the theories related to migrant workers in Thailand by dividing them into three main groups, which are: (1) theories explaining the emergence of migrant workers; (2) theories describing the persistence of migrants; and (3) theories explaining the factors that are important to migration. Each group contains the following details.

1. Theories that describe the emergence of migrant workers

There are several theories to explain the emergence of migrant workers, but for this paper, there are two theories in particular that are relevant to the phenomenon of migrants. They are as follows: *(1) Neoclassical Theory of Migration*. This theory offers a conceptual framework of pull and push factors. The concept was developed by international labour moving as an element of economic development (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Hicks, 1966; Lewis, 1954). It is probably the oldest and best-known theory of international migration (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, & Taylor, 1993). A significant explanation of this theory for workers moving from one country to another is the availability of job vacancies in destination countries, with people being driven by geographic differences in employment and job requirements (Kurekova, 2011) and as a result of the difference in wages between the two countries (Hicks, 1966). This can also take place between a labour-rich country and capital-rich country, resulting in labour mobility due to the demand for income by the migrants from the country of origin (Tomanek, 2011). Anticipated

¹ Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University, THAILAND

revenue from destination countries is of great value when brought back the country of origin. This explains the main ideas of this theory at the micro level. Harris et al. (1976) contend that the decision of the movement of labour will be in the direction in which the migrants expect to see the highest benefits. This leads to increased numbers of workers and reduced wages in the destination country, though even as those wages lower, they still remain higher than wages in the country of origin, as well as opportunities being more plentiful. These are descriptions of the labour market mechanisms on a macro level.

The concept of the pull and push factors of the theory in the form of an equilibrium model is similar to the Neoclassical Micro Model, which Lee (1966) pointed out is a factor related to migration, consisting of four main aspects which are associated with the area of origin, the area of destination, intervening obstacles such as distance, travel expenses, and cultural barriers, and personal elements that affect each person differently depending on economic status, life-stage, and personality (Righard, 2012). The first three factors of Lee’s model are summarized in Figure 1.1 below:

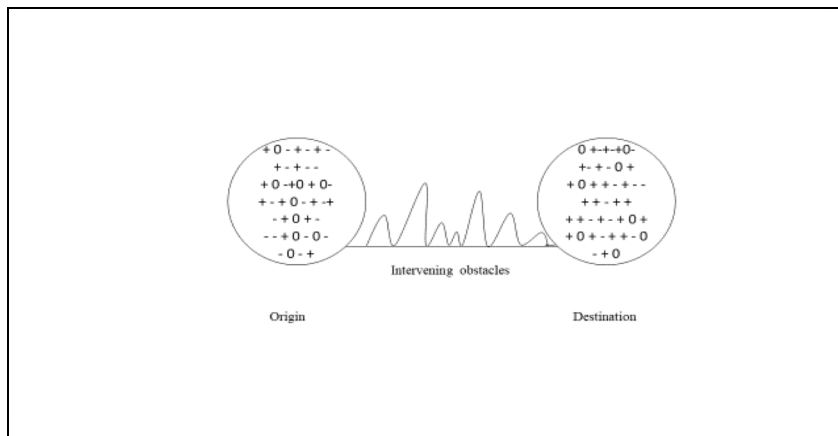


Figure 1.1. Origin and destination factors and intervening obstacles in migration. Adapted from *A theory of migration*, by E.S. Lee, 1966, *Demography*, Vol.3, No.1, p.50.

The diagram shows that there are positive (plus) and negative (minus) signs, which signify different factors, and that the social capital of each person is different, both in the countries of origin and destination. This does not necessarily represent a majority of positive signs for the receiving country. Krishnakumar and Indumathi (2014) analyze Lee's model by pointing out that, if there are more positive signs in the host country than there are negative, labour mobility is likely to occur. They also explain the key factors of migration, including economic factors, demographic factors, socio-cultural factors, political factors, and miscellaneous factors. This model is consistent with Neoclassical Micro Model in its attempts to explain the differences between individuals involved in migration. The differences are unlikely to represent the reasons for migration from the community of origin. The distinguishing feature of the model is to combine all factors that play a role in the decision to migrate, giving a general view that provides the best overall picture of migration. Ultimately, however, the model cannot explain the phenomenon of migrants deciding to return to their home countries and other vital aspects in-depth because it is a static model, focusing on external factors that cause migration only (De Haas, 2008).

The other theory, which is a micro theory, is also included in this study. **(2) *The New economics theory of migration*** puts the personal behavior of migrant workers in a broader social context. It does not just consider the individual, but also includes the family of the migrant as the most important unit in the decision-making process of labour migration. While some scholars have commented that making a family decision is not just about earning more, it also includes reducing the risk of being a labourer. This is the way to overcome the limitations and various marketing barriers (De Haas, 2010). There is also an additional comment that remittances are recognized as one of the essential moving factors that migrant workers must consider as well. However, in addition to the above factors, labour mobility decisions include other elements that are created by

the conditions of the country of origin (Kurekova, 2011). This theory does not factor in wage differentials as a critical condition of migration decisions, unlike the first theory.

In conclusion, both of these theories share a common starting point or origin for the international labour movement. While the first theory gives priority to higher wages in the destination country, the second theory, which was developed later, focuses on other issues, such as family concerns and the ability to send money back to the migrant's home country. Even when not looking at the labour market, it is important to focus on other markets, such as the insurance market or capital markets (Tomanek, 2011). If we look closely, we will see that the first theory focuses on pull factors from the destination country and describes the key components involved. The second theory was developed based on different views from those of the first theory. There is a different set of explanations, covering the factors that come from the country of origin, such as the indivisibility of the family in the decision-making process and other factors present in the destination countries.

When looking at these two theories, it helps to visualize the journey of migrants. Even though Thailand is not a productive country compared to some, the economy and level of development in Thailand is better than that in neighboring countries, with workers having greater opportunities to find work at higher wages. As a result, many unskilled migrants make the decision to move into unskilled labour in Thailand. In addition, the push and pull patterns mentioned in the section appeal to unskilled migrant workers. The main push factors are political instability and the economic status of the country of origin, while the important pull factors are the difference in wages, the social network, and migrant-relation institutions (Chalamwong, 2011).

2. Theories concerning a perpetuation of migration

Several theories contribute to explaining the continuing existence of migrant labour in the world, including workers from neighboring countries coming into Thailand, and yet by content and concepts, these theories do not differ much. In this paper, the author has introduced the Social Capital Theory and the Network Theory to describe the continuing influx of migrants in Thailand. Some scholars believe that these theories are best classified as being part of the mezzo level (Kurekova, 2011) as they tried to explain how the concept of labour networks and the movement of international workers will continue to expand until that network is sufficiently broad, making migration more manageable. The network in this case is the workforce that has already migrated and is currently working in the destination country. As a result, it is easier for workers from the same country of origin to migrate into the destination country and find work. There is a high correlation between the wages of different countries of origin and destination, the high employment rate of destination countries, and the movement of workers (Tomanek, 2011). The use of this network for employment abroad, in addition to reducing the costs of migration and the steps to becoming a foreign worker in the destination country, also helps to reduce the risks inherent in the migration process (Massey et al., 1993).

The Social Capital Theory and the Network Theory help to explain the steady flow of unskilled migrant workers into Thailand. Burmese migrant workers are finding an increasing number of jobs in Thailand, both as documented and as undocumented workers. The network is part of what makes these workers enter Thailand with or without regard for legal status. Moreover, having a network in the destination country is not only an important pull factor bringing new migrants into the country, it also helps to keep foreign workers in the destination country longer than they might otherwise be likely to stay.

3. Theories concerning determinants of migration

This Dual Labour Market Theory, developed by Piore (1979), helps clarify the factors that affect the movement of migrant workers in Thai society at present. The demand for low-skilled labour is due to a scarcity of workers in the more developed country (in this case, Thailand) than in the country of origin of the migrants, together with both employers and the government of the destination country having employment policies for this worker group. In addition to the needs of the destination country for a larger labour force, higher wages in the destination country attract labourers from the country of origin to work abroad. This theory also explains that when employers hire workers from underdeveloped countries, the employers can increase or decrease production inputs at their convenience, and they do not need to provide contracts to migrant workers as they would to workers from their own country.

Piore (1979) also sees that the theory of labour mobility is due to the employer's need for labour and is linked to the structural requirements of the new industrial economy. Labour mobility is not only caused by the push factor of the country of origin, but it also comes from the pull factor of the destination country. It is a chronic and irrevocable requirement of the state and employer to migrant workers. This corresponds with the opinion of Massey et al. (1993), who believed migration was driven by the labour requirements of the destination country, as did Arango (2000), who looked at the continuing labour requirements of the destination country.

Castles and Miller (2009) see dual labour markets as "segmented," that is, the emphasis on factors such as race and gender still appear in the labour market. There is a split between individual differences of labour, while the segmentation is considered concerning when dealing with unskilled migrants.

The conclusion of Kurekova (2011) paints a clear picture of migrant workers' decision to travel to Thailand, including the refusal by Thais to take jobs as unskilled workers. The country with capital needs more unskilled than skilled workers, while the journey of the labourers comes from the needs of the destination country and its employers. The most obvious explanation is that the demand for migrant workers comes from the fact that citizens of the host country are unwilling to accept jobs as unskilled workers.

The theories, even though described separately, overlap in some aspects, such as in the pull and push factors and the pull factor's role of having the network that reflects the continuous stream of migrants into the destination country. Migrant workers are needed in Thailand for unskilled labour, which is the main reason for their continued migration into the country.

Most of the theories used in this paper will focus on the determinants of the employment power of the destination country, both in terms of economic dimensions, in the views of the government, employers, and employees, and also on the social aspects from the perspective of migrant workers beyond the regular pull factors. To summarize, higher wages, job vacancies, and the need for unskilled labour are the main forces of attraction in the destination country. Migrants use existing networks to help them move into the destination country, thereby reducing risks for themselves and their families when making the decision to become a worker in a foreign country.

References

- Castles, S. & Miller, M. J. (2009). *The age of migration: International population Movements in the modern world*. (4th ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan
- Castles, S. & Miller, M. J. (2009). *The age of migration: International population Movements in the modern world*. (4th ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan
- De Hass, H. (2008). *Migration and development: A theoretical perspective*. International migration institute, James Martin 21st Century school. University of Oxford, working paper.
- De Hass, H. (2010). *Migration and development: A theoretical perspective*. *International migration review*, 44 (1), (Spring), 227-264.
- Harris, J.R., & Todaro, M.P. (1970). *Migration, unemployment and development: A two-sector analysis*. *The American Economic Review*, 60(1), 126-142.
- Hicks, J.R. (1966). *The theory of wages*. (2nd ed.). London: Macmillan.
- Krishnakumar, P., & Indumathi, T. (2014). *Pull and push factors of migration*. *Sona global management review*, 8, Issue 4, August.
- Kurekova, L. (2011). *Theories of migration: Conceptual review and empirical testing in the context of the EU East-West flows*.
- Lee, E.S. (1966). *A theory of migration*. *Demography*, 3 (1), 47-57.
- Lewis, W.A. (1954). *The principles of economic planning: A study prepared for the Fabian Society*. Central European University, paper prepared for interdisciplinary conference on migration, economic change, and social change.
- Massey, D.S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1993). *Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal*. *Population and development review*, 19 (3), (Sep.), 431-466.
- Piore, M.J. (1979). *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Righard, E. (Ed.). (2012). *Theories and typologies of migration: An overview and a primer*, Willy Brandt series of working papers in international migration and ethnic relations 3/12. Malmo University Sweden: Malmo Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (MIM).
- Tomanek, A. (2011). *International migration*. Retrieved from <http://understandingmigration.blogspot.jp/2011/03/international-migration-theories.html>