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Migration for Happiness?

Abstract

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When people dream of emigration, do they want to go to a rich country or for a happy one? While on an international scale, the two often go hand in hand, the Gallup World Poll, which asks questions about emigration aspirations, shows that the two elements come into play separately: countries with greater average life satisfaction exert an attraction beyond their wealth and historical proximity to countries of origin.

Plans to emigrate in the next year, more concrete than aspirations or hopes, follow a similar pattern with only some modifications due to regulatory and geographical constraints. The persistence of life satisfaction of destination countries as a predictor indicates the force of attraction of the possibility of a better life. Where people actually go may be different from the place that they hoped to go – attesting to the power of immigration barriers.

Once arrived in the host country, immigrants' life satisfaction tends to be lower than that of the native-born – however, the ranking of countries is the same whether we consider the criterion of their satisfaction or that of the native-born.

In 2020, 281 million people, or one in thirty, lived outside their native country. This is twice as many as in 1990, and the trend is continues upwards. What are these increasingly numerous individuals looking for? What factors are behind their decision to leave? While there is no mono-causal link, and therefore no single factor that explains the decision to move, the hierarchy and diversity of these factors is a matter of debate.

Some studies have emphasized the importance of economic conditions in decision-making, for example, income,[1] wage inequalities,[2] employment opportunities[3] or migration costs.[4] Others have focused on non-economic factors, such as climatic shocks,[5] armed conflict,[6] geographical distance,[7] diaspora and networks,[8] migration regulations,[9] as well as more individual factors such as level of education,[10] age and marital status[11] or risk aversion.[12] The factors are diverse, and while some are linked to the country of origin, others are linked to the country of destination, confirming the intuition of the "push-pull" model,[13] according to which individuals choose to emigrate both because of negative factors in their country of origin, and because of positive factors in their destination.

However, scant consideration has been given to **subjective factors**, foremost among which is well-being, even though they likely to influence the decision to emigrate. Only a handful of studies have shown a robust link between an individual's life satisfaction and intention to emigrate and/or national emigration rates, and there is disagreement about the nature of this link: for some,[14] the relationship between satisfaction with one's living conditions and willingness to emigrate is negative - the more satisfied one is, the less likely one is to emigrate; for others, it is U-shaped -

above a certain level of satisfaction, the willingness to emigrate increases, both within[15] and between countries.[16]

These subjective factors can be considered within the framework of Lee's push-pull model. Well-being influences not only the decision to emigrate, but also the attractiveness of a destination: countries with the happiest populations attract relatively more migrants, even when controlling for standard macroeconomic variables.[17]

This note provides a new overview of the issue, using the latest available data sources, including the Gallup global survey, which includes questions on emigration aspirations and intentions, as well as Eurostat, OECD and UN databases on actual migratory flows.

Material conditions and well-being: what role in the desire to emigrate?

In the Gallup survey, people who declare an aspiration to emigrate permanently, *i.e.*, their hypothetical wish to emigrate if it were possible,[18] or their concrete plans to emigrate permanently,[19] are different from those who do not. Those who wish to emigrate are poorer, younger, have more children, feel less free, have less confidence in their country's government, are in poorer health, are less satisfied with their lives and standard of living. They display more negative emotions (preoccupation, sadness, anger, stress) and fewer positive emotions (smiling, joy, pain). Would-be emigrants are characterized by less favorable living conditions, both objective and subjective (Table 1).[20]

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1   Hyll et Schneider, 2014 ; Kennan et Walker, 2011 ; Stark et Taylor, 1989
2   Stark, 2006
3   Naudé, 2010 ; Bartolini *et al.*, 2017
4   Berger et Blomquist, 1992
5   Beine *et al.*, 2015 ; Cai *et al.*, 2016
6   Lundquist et Massey, 2005 ; Bohra-Mishra et Massey, 2011
7   Clark *et al.*, 2007
8   Mckenzie et Rapoport, 2007 ; McKenzie et Rapoport, 2010 ; Collier et Hoeffler, 2018
9   Bertoli *et al.*, 2016
10 Chiquiar et Hanson, 2005
11 Hatton et Williamson, 2002 ; Clark *et al.*, 2007
12 Jaeger *et al.*, 2010 ; Gibson et McKenzie, 2011
    13 Lee, 1966
14 Chindarkar, 2014 ; Otrachshenko et Popova, 2014 ; Cai *et al.*, 2014
15 Ivlevs, 2015
16 Polgreen et Simpson, 2011
17 Lovo, 2014
18 *Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move PERMANENTLY to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?*
19 *Are you planning to move permanently to another country in the next 12 months, or not? (asked only of those who would like to move to another country).*
20 Tables are available in the annex of this *Note.*

Explanatory variables for migration aspiration and planning
Linear regression coefficients

Source: Gallup World Poll
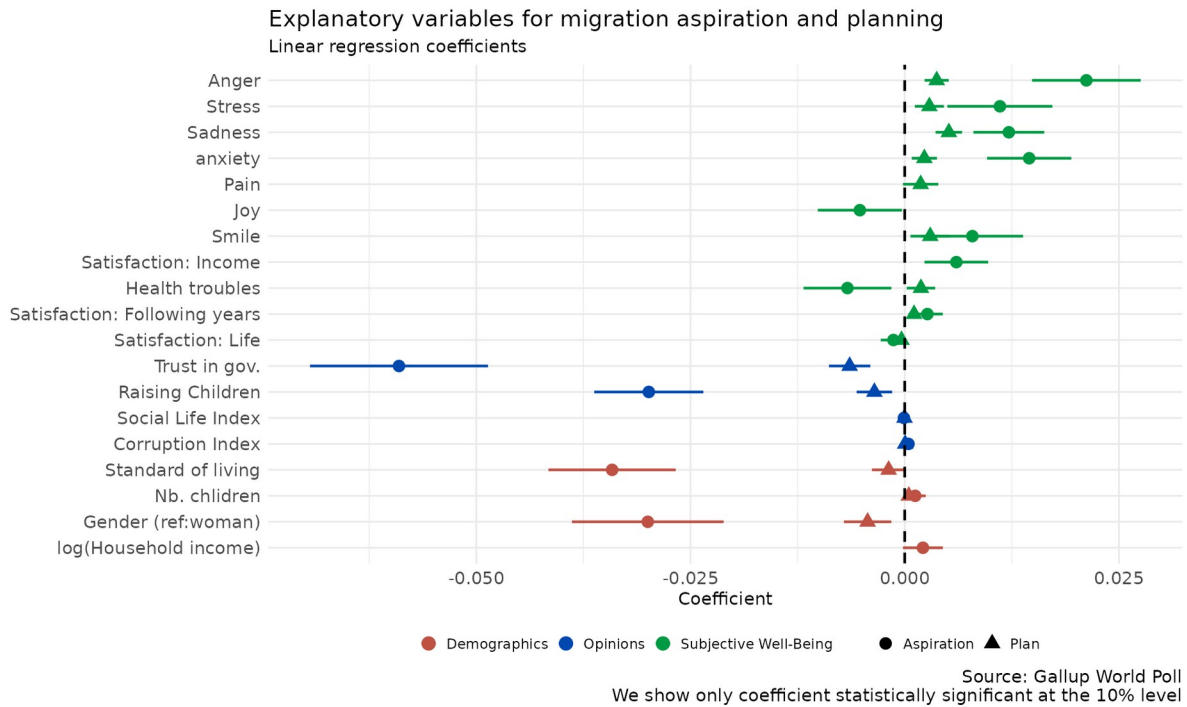We show only coefficient statistically significant at the 10% level

Figure 1

An econometric analysis of wishes and intentions to emigrate confirms these observations. Figure 1 shows the regression coefficients, *i.e.*, the partial correlation between the wish or intention to emigrate on one hand, and people's living conditions on the other. Subjective perception of living conditions at home plays an important role (blue), as do negative emotions (red) and standard of living (green). Those who express a desire to emigrate are wealthier — once controlling for education, meaning these are people with a lower monetary return on their education level — and male; they report less social mobility, less freedom, less trust in government, less desire for their children to grow up in the country, and less happiness. ***Indicators of subjective well-being play an important role in the desire to emigrate. The results are similar for people planning to emigrate.***

Do happy places attract immigrants?

To go a step further and integrate macroeconomic living conditions into the analysis, we move the analysis to the country level, and estimate so-called "gravity equations", which include both aggregate and individual dimensions.

Consider the various predictors of the number of people wishing to emigrate to a given country. Econometric estimates show that desired countries for emigration are those with the highest living standards and opportunities, as well as the highest (average) life satisfaction of their inhabitants. The model indicates that the attractiveness of countries whose inhabitants are the most satisfied with their lives is not only due to their material living conditions. Indeed, this relationship persists even after controlling for the influence of per capita income (Table 2). Conversely, when we estimate the number of people who wish to leave a country, we identify low per capita living standards and high unemployment as push factors – but not life satisfaction (Table 3). Attraction and repulsion factors are therefore not perfectly symmetrical.

Finally, using the ratios between the variables characterizing two countries, we can understand the reasons why people specifically want to leave one country for another. We find that having a common language, a colonial relationship or a trade relationship has a positive impact on desired migration flows between two countries.

Above all, econometric estimates reveal the attractiveness of the differential in wealth and opportunities, as well as in the (average) life satisfaction of residents, between the destination country and the country of origin. Beyond the material aspects, the difference in average subjective well-being between countries is an important aspect of migration dynamics. **People want to emigrate to countries whose populations are happier than their own.**

Material conditions and well-being: what role in *actual* migration?

The analysis so far has described emigration desires and intentions. To what extent do these declared desires correspond to actual migration flows? To find out, we compare the subjective perceptions of individuals as revealed by the Gallup survey with sources concerning actual migratory flows.

Thanks to OECD data covering a large and diverse set of countries, we can verify that the life satisfaction of a country's inhabitants does play a role in actual migration between countries, even when controlling for either population or per-capita income. Similarly, when we consider bilateral migration flows between countries, i.e., the ratios of variables between countries of origin and destination, the life satisfaction ratio appears to be a positive factor (Table 4), over and above the countries' level of wealth and population size.

UN data reporting both unilateral and bilateral migration at a global scale produce qualitatively similar results. The higher the GDP per capita and the size of the population, the more attractive a country is, and the higher the average life satisfaction of its inhabitants

(Table 5). Similarly, the ratio of average life satisfaction between two countries is a positive and significant factor (Table 6). **Over and above the relative wealth of countries, i.e., the economic reasons for migration, the appeal of a "good life" does seem to be an important factor in the actual dynamics of migration.** Finally, cultural, linguistic and geographic ties (having a common border) influence migration flows.

Do immigrants become as happy as natives?

Though they are drawn by the attraction of the "good life", immigrants tend to be less happy than natives of their destination country. We have verified this well-known observation[21] with Gallup data: on average, immigrants declare themselves less happy than non-immigrants, except in Japan and Romania (immigrants in these countries are mainly from North America and Western Europe).

Despite this gap in life satisfaction between immigrants and non-immigrants, which might be explained by the loss of social and family ties, uprooting and possible language difficulties, the ranking of countries according to immigrants' life satisfaction is very similar
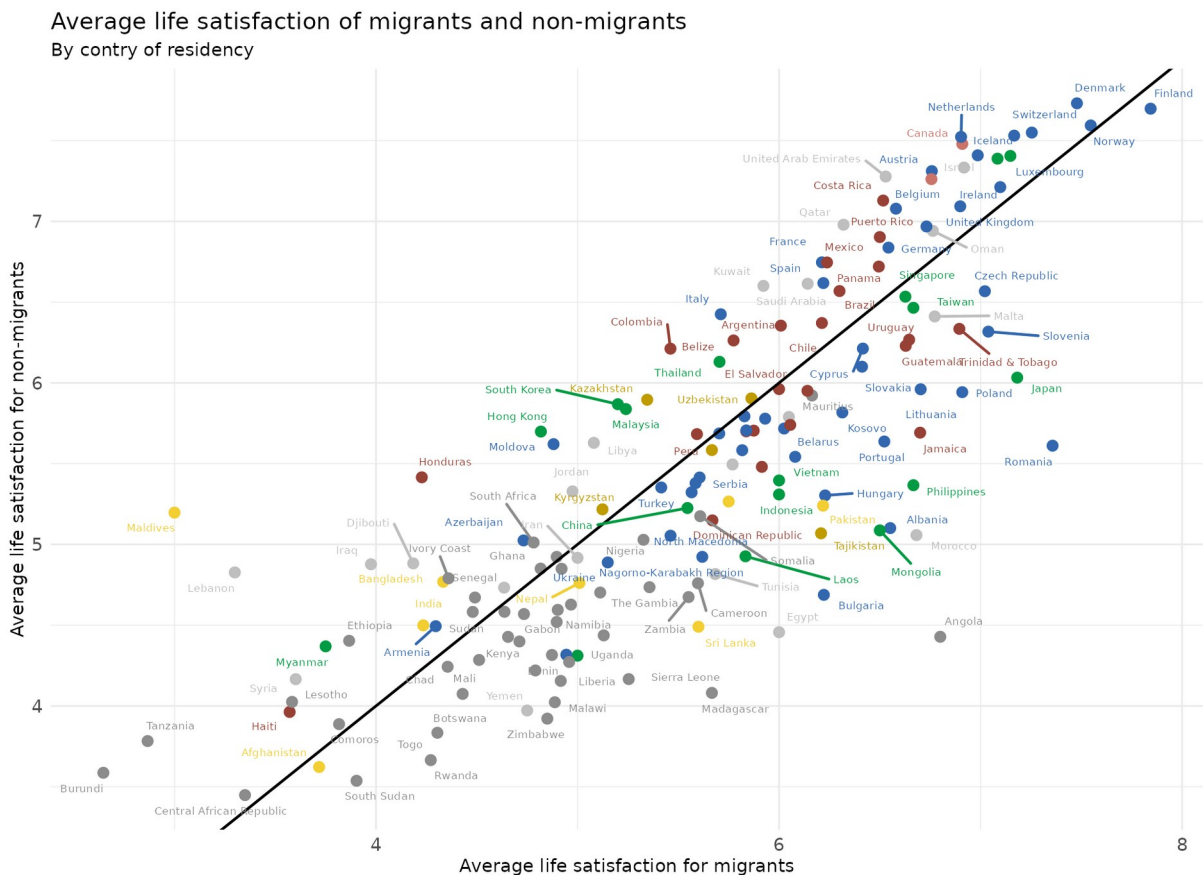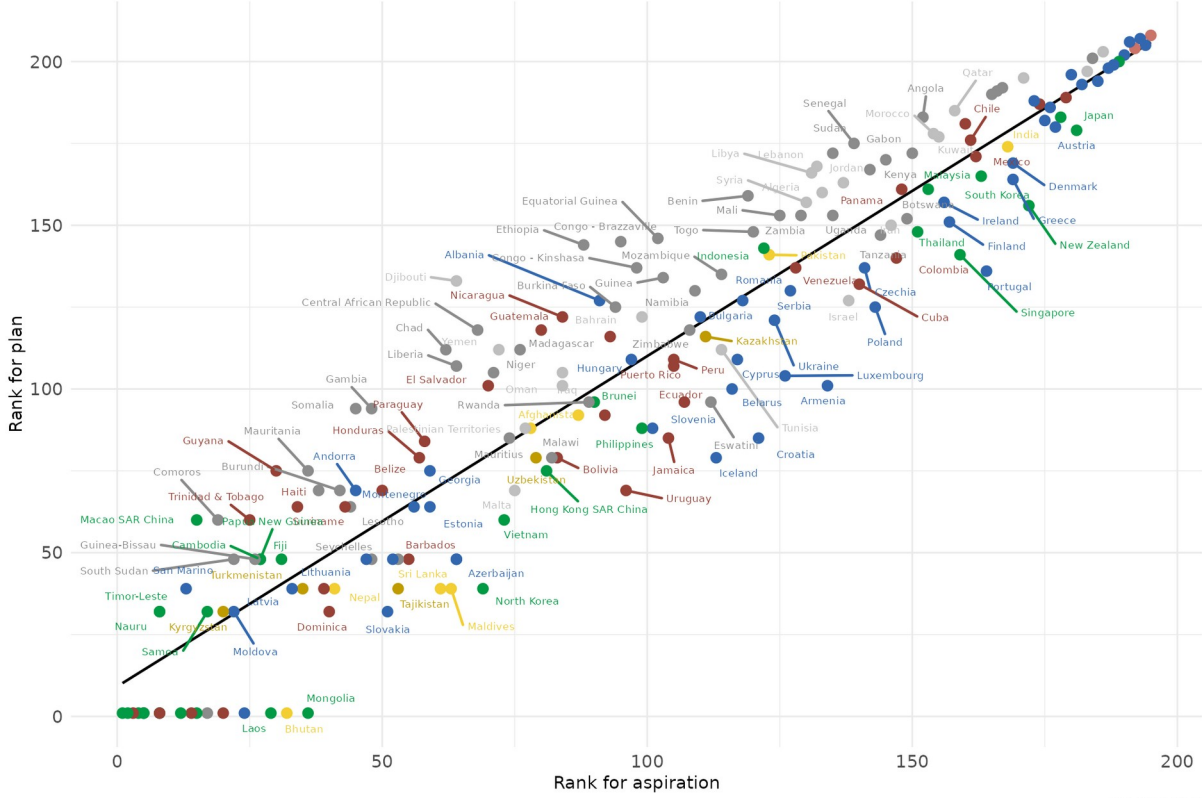

Average life satisfaction of migrants and non-migrants
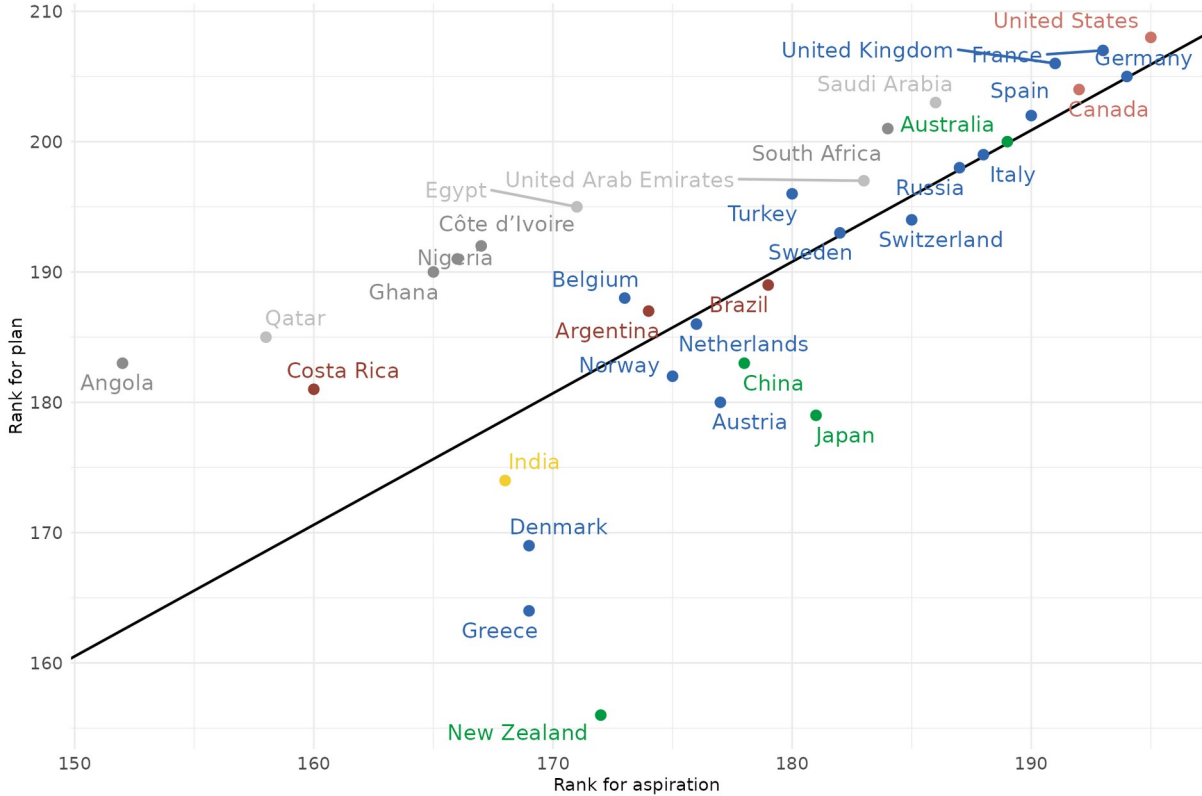By contry of residency

Figure 2

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[21]   Senik, 2014 ; Helliwell *et al.*, 2018

Aspiration and plans for migration, by country of destination

Source: Gallup World Poll

Aspiration and plans for migration, by country of destination

Source: Gallup World Poll

Figure 3

to that obtained from the general population. Whether immigrants or natives, people in Finland, Norway and Denmark declare themselves to have the highest happiness. Iceland, Switzerland, New Zealand and Australia are next in line, despite some shifts in position (Figure 2).

All the sources considered suggest that **well-being indicators play a decisive role in the desire to emigrate, the plan to emigrate and actual emigration. Migrants leave to be happier, to build a "good life" in richer countries whose populations are also happier.**

Is there a discrepancy between desired and actual migration?

There is a fairly strong correlation between the proportion of people declaring a desire to leave a country and the proportion of people intending to emigrate (Figure 3). This is not perfect, however: African countries rank higher in terms of migration plans than in terms of aspiration - they are above the diagonal of the graph. Conversely, a country like New Zealand is the subject of a fair number of aspirations (in 23rd position), but only comes in 52nd position when it comes to firmer migration plans.

These discrepancies between aspirations and intentions obviously include the practical obstacles to emigration faced by nationals of many countries. Figure 4 shows that most potential migrants come from Africa,

the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, Latin America. The countries where people express the least desire to emigrate are in South and South-East Asia.

The United States is the most desired destination, attracting mostly people from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Euro-Mediterranean countries follow. Germany attracts many Europeans, France many Africans, Spain many South Americans.

But when it comes to actual net flows, the ranking of host countries is markedly different, according to UN data. The United States remains in the lead, but the Gulf States - Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - appear at the top of the rankings. France loses a significant number of places, as do other European countries (but not Germany), which can be explained by the existence of barriers to entry: while it is at the top of the ranking in terms of desired destination, France ranks much lower in terms of actual destination (Figure 5).

Even if desired and actual migration dynamics do not fully match, they both reflect material as well as immaterial pull factors, notably the subjective well-being of the destination country's inhabitants, above and beyond their standard of living.

Rank of aspiration to immigrate
by region of origin

Rank of plans for immigration
by region of origin

Legend: Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, Central Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, Middle East & North Africa, South Asia, East Asia & Pacific, North America
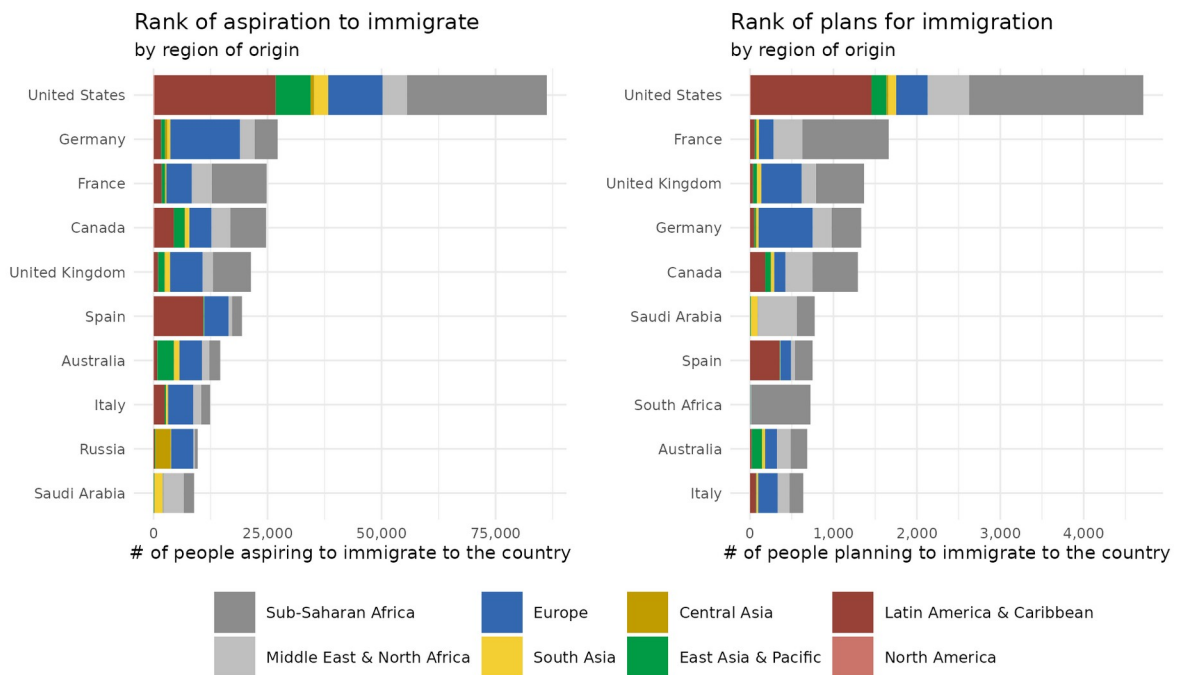
Source: Gallup World Poll

Figure 4

Ranking of host countries
Total number of immigrants
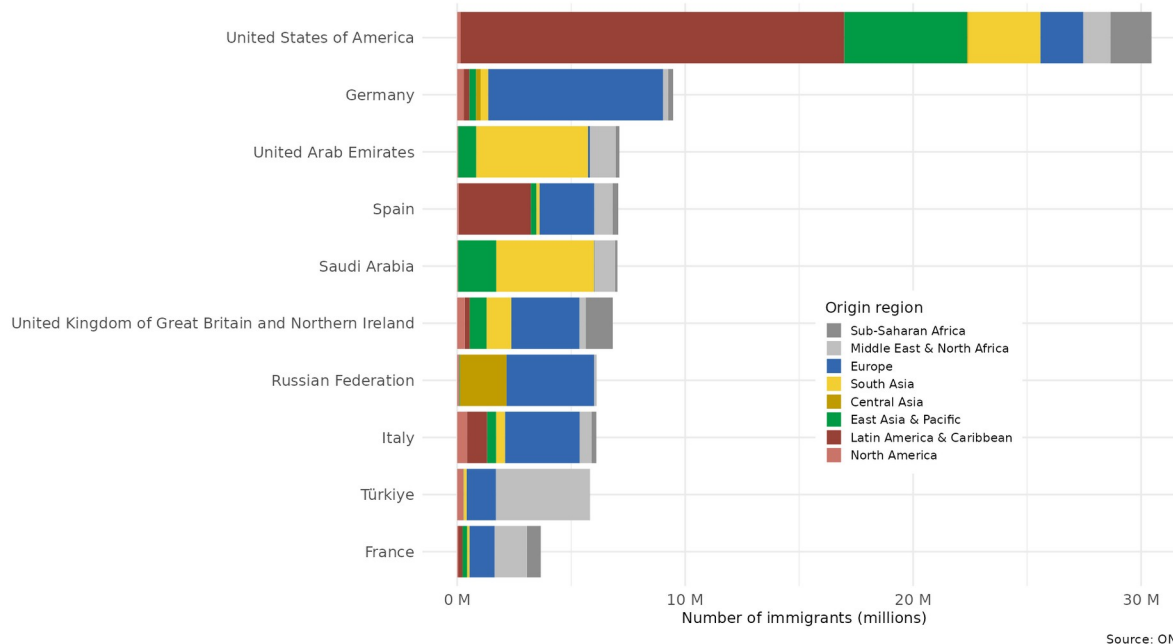
Figure 5

Data

Gallup World Poll

The Gallup World Poll is an annual survey carried out on a representative sample of the population in almost 150 countries, since 2005. Its aim is to provide information on the feelings, opinions and living conditions of people around the world. Its annual representative sample covers 99% of the world's inhabitants.

CEPII

We used two CEPII databases: Gravity and Geodist. The Geodist database provides information on the geographical and cultural distance between all the countries in the world. It contains, for example, variables indicating whether two countries share an official language or a common language, whether they have colonial ties, whether they are geographically contiguous, as well as various measures of geographical distance. The Gravity database, on the other hand, provides bilateral and annual macroeconomic and geographic information between all the countries in the world. To a certain extent, the Geodist database is included in the Gravity database, which provides more information on commercial, cultural and diplomatic relations between countries. In particular, we have used information on trade, religious proximity and diplomatic disagreement. Both databases draw on a huge variety of sources, including many from established international institutions such as the UN, IMF, GATT and World Bank.

Documentation : http://www.cepii.fr/CEPII/en/bdd_modele/bdd_modele_item.asp?id=8

World Bank

We used several databases provided by the World Bank. The most important database we used is the World Development Indicators, which provides annual information on key macroeconomic variables such as average per capita income, GDP growth, inflation, government debt, unemployment rate, etc. All this information comes directly from the national registers of each country.

United Nations

The international immigration data we use were compiled by the United Nations Population Division. These are five-yearly estimates of the stock of migrants by country of origin living in a country since 1990. To do this, the UN uses mainly census data collected from member countries, but also survey data and national registers to fill in missing or incomplete information. The database covers 201 countries, although the amount of information available for each country differs greatly because some countries do not have census data precise enough to identify the places of origin of migrants within their country. From these stock data, it is thus possible to reconstitute estimated flow data by subtracting migrant stocks in each quinquennium from stocks in the previous quinquennium. This

method does not cover actual flows, but only net flows, as we have no primary information on the number of people entering and leaving one country for another. From this, we were able to construct a bilateral database containing an approximation of net migratory flows between pairs of countries per quinquennium, as well as a unilateral database providing information on the net flow of migrants from one country to the rest of the world.

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Annex: Tables

Individual level: an immigrant profile

Table 1

	Aspiration			Plan		
Dimension	**No**	**Yes**	**Difference**	**No**	**Yes**	**Difference**
Household income/1000	27.95	19.23	-8.73	26.68	18.58	-8.09
Age	42.43	33.67	-8.76	41.17	31.63	-9.54
Nb. children	1.23	1.47	0.24	1.26	1.76	0.5
Raising Children	0.73	0.59	-0.14	0.71	0.56	-0.15
Trust in Government	0.55	0.38	-0.17	0.52	0.38	-0.14
Health	0.25	0.21	-0.04	0.25	0.21	-0.04
Satisfaction: Income	2.29	2.5	0.21	2.32	2.53	0.21
Standard of Living	0.65	0.52	-0.13	0.63	0.48	-0.15
Satisfaction: Life	5.59	5.17	-0.42	5.53	4.95	-0.58
Satisfaction: Following years	6.83	6.86	0.03	6.83	6.99	0.16
Smile	0.72	0.71	-0.01	0.72	0.7	-0.02
Joy	0.71	0.66	-0.05	0.7	0.66	-0.04
Pain	0.3	0.31	0.01	0.3	0.32	0.02
Anxiety	0.36	0.43	0.07	0.37	0.45	0.08
Sadness	0.22	0.27	0.05	0.23	0.3	0.07
Stress	0.31	0.39	0.08	0.32	0.39	0.07
Anger	0.19	0.25	0.06	0.2	0.29	0.09

NB: All differences are statistically significant at the 0,1% level.
Source: Gallup World Poll

Destination countries

Table 2: Regression coefficients. Dependent variable: number of people aspiring/planning to migrate to destination country d

d = Destination Country	Aspiration	Plan
Log(GDP per capita) d	122.087***	25.945***
	(18.351)	(5.270)
Education Spending d	20.972**	3.741*
	(8.168)	(2.116)
Unemployment Rate d	8.457***	0.809*
	(1.910)	(0.472)
Log(Population) d	177.141***	32.395***
	(21.831)	(5.560)
Average Life Satisfaction d	119.346***	11.780***
	(15.457)	(3.784)

d = Destination Country	Aspiration	Plan
Observations	1,492	612
R^2	0.243	0.219
Adjusted R^2	0.233	0.206
Residual Standard Error	618.158 (df = 1471)	114.374 (df = 601)
F-Stat	23.641^{***} (df = 20; 1471)	16.816^{***} (df = 10; 601)

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Source: Gallup World Poll & World Bank

Origin countries

Table 3: Regression coefficients. Dependent variable: number of people aspiring/planning to migrate from origin country o

	Aspiration	Aspiration	Plan
Log(GDP per capita) o	-57.529^{***}		-12.491^{***}
	(8.723)		(2.767)
Education Spending o	-3.391	0.501	-0.217
	(4.518)	(4.856)	(1.643)
Unemployment Rate o	3.903^{***}	0.533	1.153^{**}
	(1.255)	(1.324)	(0.472)
Log(Population) o	-5.948	-2.934	-2.053
	(4.228)	(4.312)	(1.278)
Average Life Satisfaction o	-1.576	-47.355^{***}	-3.130
	(8.597)	(8.591)	(3.058)
Observations	402	402	247
R^2	0.199	0.112	0.204
Adjusted R^2	0.172	0.085	0.171
Residual Standard Error	113.873 (df = 388)	119.740 (df = 389)	29.989 (df = 236)
F-Stat	7.416^{***} (df = 13; 388)	4.092^{***} (df = 12; 389)	6.058^{***} (df = 10; 236)

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Source: Gallup World Poll & World Bank

Relative features of origin and destination countries

OECD data provide migration flux between 36 member states and with some external countries (58 origin countries in total). Bilateral data correspond to raw flux (people emigrating), and are thus positive or null. Unilateral data report net flux (immigrants – emigrants), and can be negative.

Table 4: Regression coefficients. Dependent variable: number of people aspiring to migrate from origin country o *to destination country* d*.*

	Aspiration
Ratio GDP/Capita	0.232^{***}
	(0.032)

	Aspiration
Ratio Education Spending	0.867^{**}
	(0.345)
Ratio Unemployment Rate	-0.036
	(0.048)
Ratio Population	0.013^{***}
	(0.002)
Ratio Average Life Satisfaction	10.240^{***}
	(0.572)
Common Border	-0.307
	(0.440)
Common Language	8.139^{***}
	(0.448)
Former Colonial Bond	11.582^{***}
	(0.904)
log(Trade)	1.019^{***}
	(0.041)
log(Distance)	0.068
	(0.104)
Observations	25,029
R^2	0.125
Adjusted R^2	0.125
Residual Standard Error	17.838 (df = 25004)
F-Stat	149.423^{***} (df = 24; 25004)

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Source: Gallup World Poll, World Bank & CEPII

Actual flux: destination countries

Table 5: Regression coefficients. Dependent variable: net number of immigrants in destination country d.

	Full Model	Reduced Model
Log(GDP per capita) d	$64,598.340^{***}$	
	(17,245.600)	
Education Spending d	371.891	$-11,057.030^{*}$
	(5,263.338)	(6,653.164)
Unemployment Rate d	$-4,376.016^{**}$	-2,346.377
	(2,013.513)	(2,002.332)
Log(Population) d	$45,854.690^{***}$	
	(7,573.758)	
Average Life Satisfaction d	-5,147.410	$40,160.350^{***}$

	Full Model	Reduced Model
	(11,652.360)	(9,904.130)
Observations	301	301
R^2	0.276	0.081
Adjusted R^2	0.243	0.046
Residual Standard Error	121,750.300 (df = 287)	136,673.700 (df = 289)
F-Stat	8.407*** (df = 13; 287)	2.315*** (df = 11; 289)

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Source: Eurostat, Gallup World Poll & World Bank

Actual flux: relative features

Table 6: Regression coefficients. Dependent variable: net number of immigrants in destination country d.

	Country level
Ratio GDP/Capita	−41.223**
	(22.437)
Ratio Education Spending	−17.587
	(162.436)
Ratio Unemployment Rate	−37.823
	(43.291)
Ratio Population	−1.174***
	(0.569)
Ratio Average Life Satisfaction	4,584.544***
	(631.220)
Common Border	17,299.190***
	(2,809.669)
Common Language	4,173.573***
	(796.645)
Former Colonial Bond	6,910.037***
	(1,720.954)
log(Distance)	231.538
	(261.259)
Observations	19,565
R^2	0.043
Adjusted R^2	0.042
Residual Standard Error	22,850.800 (df = 19553)
F-Stat	79.669*** (df = 79.669)

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Source: Gallup World Poll & Banque Mondiale & CEPII

CEPREMAP

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