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Motives for economic migration: A review

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Migration is a key driver of economic and societal transformation, touching people's lives worldwide. Understanding why people decide to migrate is crucial for fostering inclusive and diverse societies and informing effective policy-making. This paper focuses on economic migrants, a particular group of migrants whose study has primarily been confined to narrow areas of interest and characterized by inconsistent terminology, limiting cross-study comparability and the synthesis of findings. Viewed through the interdisciplinary lens and derived from theoretical, empirical, and analytical research outcomes, the present paper concludes that economic migrants' movements are influenced by the socio-demographic factors of 'age' and 'education' and are motivated by both the economic motives of 'expected income' and 'employment' and the economic-related motives of 'corruption', 'amenities', and 'happiness'. These motives also reveal a typical profile of economic migrants: working-age, highly educated, predominantly male individuals who seek opportunities in developed countries to achieve a fulfilling life. The presented findings contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic decision-making process of economic migrants and offer valuable insights for policymakers to design more nuanced and targeted strategies for integrating migrants into societies.

Keywords: Literature review, economic migrants, motives, typical profile

Political and social crises permeate our society, including human migration (McClain et al., 2022; Mountz & Mohan, 2022). Generally, human migration refers to people moving – temporarily or permanently – within national boundaries (i.e., internal migration) or across them (i.e., international migration). In 2020, the number of international migrants reached 281 million (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024) and most move to Europe, followed by Northern America, Northern Africa and Western Asia (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2019). By comparison, 740 million people migrated internally in 2009, mostly within America, followed by Europe and Africa (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009).[1]

Over time, societies encounter increasingly complex migration flows and dynamics due to an increasingly interconnected world (European Commission [EC], 2021). Most recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine – Europe's most significant exodus of refugees since 1945 – drove Ukrainians to flee their homes. Experts anticipate a rapid increase of both economic migrants and (political) refugees, especially in Poland (Elinder et al., 2023; Oxford Analytica, 2022; Szewczyk, 2022). By early 2024, between 9.6 and 10.8 million Ukrainians remain internally or internationally displaced (Düvell, 2024b).

Since economic migrants and refugees often arrive for the same reasons – such as safety, livelihood, and aspirations – economic migrants are frequently mistaken for asylum seekers (Cummings et al., 2015; Düvell, 2024a; Trilling, 2018). Unlike refugees, however, economic migrants do not qualify for asylum, as their movement is not driven by wars or persecution (Holehouse, 2016; IOM, 2019a; Semmelroggen, 2015). Additionally, they often encounter a less welcoming culture in destination countries than refugees (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; de Coninck, 2020).[2] Identifying this distinction raises important questions about the specific motivations of economic migrants as this knowledge enables policymakers to predict and interpret their behavior more effectively. Such insights are vital for designing targeted migration policies and fostering social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies (IOM, 2017). I therefore intend to synthesize existing research on economic migrants' motives, anchored in the following research question:[3]

> **Research question:** What motivates economic migrants to move within and across national boundaries?

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[1] Estimates on internal migration are scarce. Thus, most recent studies also refer to UNDP (2009); see, e.g., IOM (2018), Shi et al. (2020), or IOM (2019b).

[2] The term 'migrant' is defined by IOM (2019a) as 'a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons', excluding those 'who flee wars or persecution'. The term 'refugee', on the other hand, is defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention. It refers to an individual who, 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion', is forced to remain outside his or her respective home country and is entitled to asylum in any signatory nation of the convention (United Nations [UN] 1951, Article I (2)).

[3] Migration is a multi-disciplinary concept and comprises various disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology, geography, culture, law, political science, demography, and international relations (Cohen, 1996; Pisarevskaya et al., 2020). Only recently does de Haas (2021) attempt to develop an aspirations–capabilities framework to construct a universal theory.

At its core, (economic) migration portrays a decision-making problem (Börger et al., 2001; Sell & DeJong, 1978) involving the binary decision of moving or staying (de Jong & Gardner, 1981; Klabunde & Willekens, 2016) accompanied by imperfect information, uncertainty, and the involvement of multiple actors or stakeholders (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). These complexities highlight the dynamic nature of migration, where both internal and international migrants continuously reassess their options in response to shifting personal, social, and economic factors (Czaika et al., 2021).

Several decision theories shed light on the decision-making problem of migration. Classical theories, however, often fail to account for its inherently dynamic nature. As a case in point, rational choice theory assumes that individuals have perfect and complete information about their environment (Ganuthula, 2024; Groeneveld et al., 2017), enabling them to rationally calculate the relative benefits of moving or staying (Herrmann, 2017; Koechlin, 2020). Human capital is a key determinant as higher qualifications correlate positively with prospects of higher wages or better jobs at the destination (Sjaastad, 1962). Real-world migration, however, is far more complex (Baláž et al., 2016). Migrants make decisions with incomplete information, not knowing the likelihood of different outcomes. Dynamic decision-making models are therefore more applicable (Czaika et al., 2021). Concepts like complex problem-solving suggest individuals weigh and reassess relevant criteria of their options as new information emerges while having to cope with information overload (Baláž et al., 2016). Agent-based models further take into account how individuals interact with others and their environment, focusing on how these interactions influence the decision to migrate (Klabunde & Willekens, 2016; McAlpine et al., 2021).

Pre-existing motives are the starting point of every decision to migrate, serving as the foundation for the entire decision-making process (Mintoff, 1999; Pink, 1996). They encourage migration and shape how decisions are made, guiding individuals in weighing factors (such as costs and benefits in rational choice theory) to achieve a better quality of life after migration (Frey, 2000; Hattie et al., 2020; Sell & DeJong, 1978). Although motives are commonly recognized as key drivers of migration intentions, decision-making theories often treat them as inferred rather than explicitly examined, with economics focusing primarily on observable migration behaviors (de Jong & Gardner, 1981; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008).

I innovate by providing a *comprehensive* overview of economic migrants' motives for moving within and across national boundaries, complemented by an analysis of their relative importance and interconnections. Prior research provides limited insights into many aspects of complex migration decision-making processes (Baláž et al., 2016); most relevant to my research: studies have emphasized economics as the primary decision-making factor, while psychosocial factors (e.g., emotions) have been relegated to the background (Dennison, 2022; Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021; Massey & Espinosa, 1997; Stark & Bloom, 1985). The results of my study show the full set of motives behind economic migration that are currently known and provide makers of migration policy with a first guideline for distinguishing more easily between economic migrants and refugees. This guideline will be an important tool since the soft and often blurred boundaries between economic migrants and refugees hinder the adoption of effective policy actions (Smith, 2019). More precisely, policymakers gain valuable insights into economic migrants' behavior for formulating (effective) policy and program decisions regarding migration and integration (Akpuokwe et al., 2024; Cummings et al., 2015). They can develop targeted, comprehensive, and responsive measures that address the specific needs and aspirations of migrants while promoting social cohesion and maximizing the benefits of migration for societies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Overall, the presented paper contributes to the scholarly on migration by integrating psychosocial factors into economic migration studies and provides policymakers with a foundation for evidence-based, targeted migration policies.

In the remainder of this paper, Section 2 lays out the methodology, Section 3 discusses the motives of economic migrants, and Section 4 summarizes and concludes.

Methodology

My review is interdisciplinary and integrative[4] in nature, thus providing a comprehensive picture on the motives of economic migration[5] (Torraco, 2005; Webster, 2002; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The criteria used for inclusion and exclusion of literature sources are summarized in Table 1, ensuring a focused and methodologically robust review. I followed the recommendation of Thompson and Pocock (1991) of including unpublished work in order to limit the influence of a possible publication bias.

In writing the review, I follow the recommendations of Feak and Swales (2009) of providing a research story and consider the recommendation of Webster (2002) of providing a coherent view to understand the existing knowledge on the topic.

In reviewing the literature, I draw on the inductive approach which incorporates thematic analysis to uncover the motives underlying economic migration, as suggested by Webster (2002) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Key sources were retrieved from *Google*

[4]Integrative reviews generate novel knowledge about the topic reviewed and allow for novel perspectives to emerge (Broome, 2000; Snyder, 2019). Furthermore, they are the only approach allowing for the combination of findings from different methodologies (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), making them crucial to my research.

[5]Economic migration refers to migration driven by the aim of improving one's living conditions. An explanation of the term 'economic migrant' follows in this section.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Scope	Economic migration motives	Forced migration (asylum seekers, refugees), knowledge migration, military migration
Source Type	Books, book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, working papers	Grey literature (e.g., opinion pieces)
Disciplinary	Culture, demography, economics, geography, international relations, law, political science, psychology, sociology	Unrelated disciplines
Methodological quality	Robust methods	Weak or unclear methods (e.g., poor internal validity evidence)

Note: The criteria are presented in a logical order, with their descriptions arranged alphabetically.

Scholar, complemented by *Google* as some papers only showed up there. I chose this method of search engines because such searches are most effective when using precise terms (Rowley & Slack, 2004). I searched for the keywords 'economic migration', 'economic migrant', 'economic migration motives', and 'economic migrant motives'. A thematic analysis of the located papers revealed that the content clusters around five themes: 'expected income', 'employment', 'corruption', 'amenities', and 'happiness'; these themes are linked to each other and to two socio-demographic factors: 'age' and 'education'. I therefore refined my search results by expanding the existing keywords with these seven terms. Motives were further classified as economic (income, employment) and economic-related (corruption, amenities, happiness), highlighting their associations with age and education. Ultimately, I came up with the following definitions.

Economic migrant: *A person who voluntarily migrates from one place to another in order to improve his or her quality of life purely out of economic or economic-related interests.* I base this definition on the definition of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2006, p. 444) and of IOM (2011, p. 32), further supported by the pioneering thoughts of Ravenstein and Borjas.[6] Notably, economic migrants constitute the majority of migrants (Browne, 2017; Winchie & Carment, 1989), albeit a universally agreed-upon definition is missing. Browne (2017) – among others – does not specify the term 'economic migrants' in more detail. Dictionary definitions mainly refer to economic migrants as individuals searching for improved living standards (e.g., Harper-Collins, n.d. Lexico, n.d.); sometimes, these definitions overlap with academic definitions (e.g., Cambridge, 2021). In academia, studies' definitions often refer to 'labor market' or rather 'job opportunities' (Corkill, 2001; Mendoza et al., 2019; Yang & Guo, 1996) while non-academic institutions' definitions often refer to 'economic opportunities' (EC, 2021; IOM, 2019a).

Economic motives: *Reasons that motivate economic migrants to build wealth.* This definition builds on the economic motives' general definition of 'the desire to possess wealth' (Wicksteed, 1933) and comprises the following economic interests.

Expected Income: The expected enhancement in financial well-being resulting from migration, including wage differences between origin and destination countries, adjustments for cost of living, and the potential for long-term financial stability (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020).

Employment: The availability of jobs that match migrants' qualifications and aspirations, often a pathway to realizing income-related goals (Arikan et al., 2023).

Economic-related motives: *Reasons that motivate economic migrants to sustain wealth.* This definition is more loosely related to that of Wicksteed (1933) and covers the following economic-related interests.

Corruption: The abuse of entrusted authority for illicit gain (Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020), driving migrants to seek societies perceived as fairer and less exploitative. In the realm of migration motives, corruption has not previously been mentioned in the context of economic migration. Nonetheless, I derived it from the literature, primarily because Lapshyna (2014) and Poprawe (2015) demonstrate that, while income is a primary motive, corruption is also relevant.

Amenities: The availability of desirable natural, cultural, and social features, generally holding both economic and non-economic status of motive (Chipeniuk, 2004; Treyz et al., 1991). I classify amenities as an economic-related motive for economic migrants for

[6] Ravenstein (1876, 1885) defines the *Laws of Migration*, eleven hypotheses about people's migration and relocation behavior. The underlying data is mainly derived from UK data supplemented with international data. One of his laws states that economic causes are the main migration motive. Borjas (1987), on the contrary, identifies both non-economic and economic migration motives. On a related note, Amnesty International (2019) includes 'financial reasons' into their definition of an economic migrant.

three reasons:[7] First, the term 'wealthy' is often associated with migrants moving for amenities (Abrams et al., 2012; Chipeniuk, 2004; Croucher, 2012). Second, amenities affect economic development and are involved in a complex interplay with labor market issues. For example, amenities are often capitalized into housing prices and therefore implicitly influence income and employment (Büchler et al., 2021; Nunns, 2021; Treyz et al., 1991). Third, amenities relate to quality of life issues which genuinely go along with the economic migrants' aim of improving their quality of life (Mulligan & Carruthers, 2011; Niedomysl & Hansen, 2010).

Happiness: The subjective well-being (Bartram, 2015; Martin, 2008), more than economic well-being (Easterlin, 1974).

Associations between socio-demographic factors and migration motives: *Characteristics, determining the relative importance of different migration motives.* Van der Land (2018) finds that motives differ between individuals of different age, education, or gender. Correspondingly, Schwartz (1976) finds that age and education affect migration decisions. Collectively, Rones (1980) shows that both age and education affect economic considerations, aligned with Van der Land (2018), and migration propensity, aligned with Schwartz (1976). In a broader sense, Kugler et al. (2021) prove that moral motives guide economic decisions in social situations. For example, migration for remittances can be morally motivated by strong family ties, i.e. the moral obligation to care for one's family – often referred to as 'moral remittances' (Simoni & Voirol, 2021). Within this review, I solely focus on the socio-demographic factors of age and education for two reasons. First, these factors are central to both migration motive selection and migration decision-making. Second, the majority of economic migrants are male, leading to the decision not to differentiate migration motives by gender (Bouchoucha, 2012; IOM, 2021a).

Age: The time that a person has existed. Pittenger (1974) shows that immigration and emigration rates are age-specific. Following Pittenger's (1974) work, Rogers and Castro (1981) innovated by describing migration rates as a function of age: the propensity to migrate steadily declines with age and peaks at 20 years. They further show that these age-specific migration rates define a replicable age profile of migration. These and other researchers' findings (see, e.g., Adams, 1993; Bell & Muhidin, 2009; Bernard et al., 2014; Stark & Taylor, 1991) suggest that the age profile takes the form of an inverse U-shape. Notably, age can mechanically change the importance of migration motives as this relates to the nature of the benefits and costs associated with them. For instance, if the primary reason for migrating is the expectation of increased income, the overall potential earnings decline as individuals near retirement age. In contrast, migrating to a country with a higher cost of living can impose greater financial strain if an individual's pension has been accumulated in a country with lower living costs.[8]

Education: The indicator of economic migrants' skill levels (Beine et al., 2007). Skills are either occupation-based, school-based (Zaletel, 2006), or inseparable (Rao, 2018). For example, 'occupation-based' means that migrants have special skills due to experience in a specific field, and 'school-based' means that they have a tertiary level or higher educational degree such as a Master or a PhD (Eich-Krohm, 2013). Examining the relationship between education and migration reveals a complex and multifaceted dynamic (N. Williams, 2009). While some researchers find a positive relationship between education and migration, others find a negative relationship or no significant relationship. Quinn and Rubb (2005) provide an overview of these different findings and argue that the differences stem from education-occupation (mis)matches. Soon (2013) conducted a meta-analysis that explores the nuanced role of education in migration decisions, further underscoring the importance of aligning qualifications with economic opportunities in host countries.

In sum, I collect and aggregate results of 167 published and 30 working/unpublished papers, as well as 30 books/book chapters from theoretical, empirical, and analytical research, predominantly from survey studies. The period reviewed spans from 1960 to 2023, with the largest portion of papers (70.00 percent) from 2005 to 2020, assuming a five-year interval. The paper's main body follows a hypothesis/support structure (motivated by the inductive research method) that is further complemented by migration patterns and constraints. The latter outlines migration patterns driven by the motives of migrants and, if present, the constraints that migrants face when making a decision. However, in some cases, it was not clear whether observed migration patterns were purely driven by migrants' motives or influenced by external constraints such as high regulatory environments in developed countries, that put in place high barriers to migration.[8]

Drawing on this methodology, the next section explores the core topic of migration motives, emphasizing their links to age and education, their relative importance, and the migration patterns and constraints observed, ultimately deriving a typical profile of an economic migrant.

Motives of Economic Migrants

Motives play a crucial role in the decision-making process of economic migrants. They are the reasons why these migrants' move within or across national boundaries (de Jong & Gardner, 1981).

Motives arise from individuals' desire to fulfill unsatisfied needs by leaving the respective environment

[7] The literature reveals amenities as a migration motive for economic migrants (Hayes, 2015; Treyz et al., 1991). Nonetheless, migrants moving for amenities are often also seen as a distinct group altogether, namely as amenity migrants (Chipeniuk, 2004), or are discussed together with economic migrants, namely as amenity-led migrants (Glorioso, 2000; Moss, 1994, 2006).

[8] I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

(Czaika et al., 2021). Different circumstances may play a role in activating a specific motive. As a case in point, cyclical effects can shape migration decisions and thus affect economic migrants' motives. Contrary to common wisdom, Levy et al. (2017) show that migrants are less likely to move for economic and economic-related motives during recessions. Fix et al. (2009) support this finding by arguing that recessions dampen the inflow of economic migrants and incentivize migrants to remain in the destination country despite a lack of economic motives rather than returning to their home country. A more nuanced analysis reveals that migration responses to cyclical effects are highly variable and vary across time, countries, and individual preferences (see, e.g., Dobson et al., 2009; Mas Giralt, 2017; Pandit, 1997; Prieto-Rosas et al., 2018). In particular, the willingness to migrate is sensitive to the ability to do so, which can be limited by legal constraints or practical aspects such as financial resources to undertake the journey (Gordon, 1985; van Stiphout-Kramer et al., 2024). Importantly, the association between willingness and ability to migrate, as well as the variation in motives over time, across countries, and based on individual preferences, remains independent of cyclical effects (Hampshire, 2010; Niedomysl, 2011; Ortega & Peri, 2009; Polgreen & Simpson, 2011; Thomas et al., 2019). In addition, as noted in section 2, age and education influence the types of motives driving migration. Considering the critical importance of these factors (Greenwood, 1997), the following section examines their association with migration in more detail.

Associations between Socio-Demographic Factors and Migration Motives

Age and education influence how individuals perceive opportunities and constraints, thus determining the relative importance of different migration motives.

Age

***Hypothesis* 1.** *Migration motives vary by age. Older and younger migrants move for various reasons.*

Support: Graves (1979) provides evidence that migration motives change with age. He finds that young migrants predominantly move for economic opportunities such as income and employment, while older migrants move for the amenity mix of the location. Clark and Hunter's (D. E. Clark & Hunter, 1992) findings, aligned with Graves', show that both the middle and senior-aged have a greater probability of migrating for amenity purposes, compared to the younger. Moreover, the middle-aged prefer locations with low housing values, while their older cohorts prefer high-value locations. Millington (2000) also shows that the elderly primarily move in search of better amenities and housing cost effects. He suggests analyzing migratory flows disaggregated by age since migrants' motives are age-related, arguing that failing to disaggregate by age prevents researchers from correctly interpreting migration motives. In addition to the different motives, Colón-López et al. (2009) observe that younger migrants have advantages over older migrants: they can more easily learn new languages and adapt to new social customs.

Age-related migration patterns and constraints: Economic migrants are commonly of working age, spanning 16 to 65 years (Agudelo-Suárez et al., 2012; Browne, 2017). Those who migrate for economic reasons are typically between 20 and 49 years old (Colón-López et al., 2009), with their migration often driven by high mobility, particularly among individuals among 30 (Bernard et al., 2014). Additionally, under-30s migrate either with parents (Lemmermann & Riphahn, 2018; Lundborg, 1991) or alone (Alexander & Ward, 2018). In rural areas, those aged 20 to 24, are more likely to emigrate than immigrate, reflecting low early-age immigration rates and high early-age emigration rates (Pittenger, 1974). By contrast, older migrants, particularly those aged 50 and above, prioritize family and employment security, leading to lower migration rates compared to younger cohorts (IOM, 2019b; Lundborg, 1991). Notably, migration rates tend to increase among children and those nearing retirement age (Bernard et al., 2014; Rogers & Castro, 1981), with variations observed in countries such as China, Brazil, and Portugal. These deviations are attributed to cross-country differences within one's lifespan (Bell & Muhidin, 2009; Bernard et al., 2014).

Education

***Hypothesis* 2.** *Education influences migration decisions in complex ways. Overeducated economic migrants are more likely to move than undereducated economic migrants.*

Support: Browne (2017) outlines three generalizable findings. First, education influences immigration and emigration in that lower education leads to fewer options for legal migration (see also Ginsburg et al., 2016). Second, high-skill people are more likely to migrate than low-skill people, due to a combination of higher financial capacity, greater aspirations for job prospects abroad (including a lack of appropriate employment at home), more legal options, and a demand for their skills abroad (see also Dustmann and Glitz, 2011). Third, male migrants are more likely to move for work whereas female migrants are more likely to move for education. Therefore, men are more likely to be 'economic migrants' than women (Mendoza et al., 2019). Quinn and Rubb (2005) examine migrants' education-occupation match and suggest it as a possible reason for the mixed results in the literature on the migration-education relationship. They demonstrate that positively mismatched workers – i.e., migrants who are overeducated for a job – are more likely to migrate. On the contrary, negatively mismatched workers – i.e., migrants who are undereducated for a job – are less likely to migrate. This pattern is because negatively mismatched migrants are likely to have a favorable education-occupation match and migration for

them, thus being less likely to result in a more favorable occupation.

Education-related migration patterns and constraints: High-skilled migration is more likely to occur, as it is actively encouraged in many regions, particularly in Europe, where aging populations create a demand for skilled labor (Naumann et al., 2018; Skeldon, 2018; Zaletel, 2006). By contrast, low-skilled migration faces greater social and economic constraints. Natives often perceive low-skilled migrants as 'welfare migrants' rather than 'economic migrants', viewing them as net beneficiaries of the welfare state (Warin & Svaton, 2008). Wealthier natives, in particular, tend to oppose low-skilled migration due to its association with progressive tax systems, which disproportionately place the fiscal burden of supporting these migrants on higher-income individuals (Facchini & Mayda, 2009; Naumann et al., 2018). Despite these challenges, low-skilled migrants benefit from established networks in destination countries, which reduce migration and assimilation costs and facilitate entry (Lumpe, 2019).

Building on the influence of the socio-demographic factors of age and education, the next subsection focuses on economic motives as the central driver of migration decisions.

Economic Motives

Economic motives – specifically income and employment – have long been the cornerstone of migration research, reflecting individuals' aspirations to enhance their financial and professional prospects.

Expected Income

***Hypothesis* 3.** *Most economic migrants move in hopes of receiving a higher income in the destination country.*

Support: The prospect of higher incomes motivates most economic migrants (Bartram, 2011). Sjaastad (1960, 1962) first investigates the relationship between migration and income. He uses US interstate migration data and finds that migration correlates positively with income at the destination. Todaro (1969) and Harris and Todaro (1970) follow up on Sjaastad's work and introduce a two-sector model of internal migration, more precisely of rural-urban migration. Their model provides evidence that migration continues for as long as actual rural wages are lower than expected urban wages. Although these early pioneers focus on internal migration, the expected income effect is crucial for international migration (Black et al., 2011; Stark & Bloom, 1985). As a case in point, Ortega and Peri (2009, 2013) stress the positive impact of income inequality on international migration flows. They find that a 10 percent rise in income per capita in a destination country leads to a 0.76 percent rise in immigration flows. Other researchers' findings also support the conclusion that the potential income in the destination country plays a key role in international migration choices (see, e.g., Bauer & Zimmermann, 1998; Borjas, 1990; X. Clark et al., 2007; Grogger & Hanson, 2011; Mayda, 2010; Shamsuddin et al., 2022). Studies showing similar results for internal migration are Hierro and Maza (2010) for Africa, Kennan and Walker (2011) for Spain, and Howell (2023) for China.

***Hypothesis* 4.** *Economic migrants prioritize achieving higher relative income, using it to send funds home, explore non-earnings income opportunities, and settle permanently when financial goals are met.*

Support: Besides the general research on the income-migration relationship, researchers investigate specific income-related aspects. In light of the aim of this paper, I consider four findings to be the most interesting and relevant. First, migration is driven by low relative income rather than by low absolute income, due to psychological and social importance of relative positioning in income distribution (Simpson, 2017; Vernazza, 2013).[9] Second, the prospect of higher incomes becomes more important when migrants aspire to settle permanently (Akay et al., 2012); however when the income at their destination turns out to be lower than expected, they decide to return home (Makina, 2012), provided that they are not subject to the sunk-cost fallacy (Czaika, 2015; Harman et al., 2020). Third, 50 percent of the income is sent home in the form of remittances (Van Hear et al., 2012). Fourth, income consists of non-earnings, i.e., investment income, and of earnings, i.e., wages and salary; the former is an increasingly attractive source of income (Nelson, 2005).

Income-related migration patterns and constraints: Migration is strongly influenced by relative income disparities. In particular, individuals with low incomes migrate more frequently if they are surrounded by richer individuals than if they are surrounded by those of similar socioeconomic status, reflecting the aspirational drive to close perceived income gaps and achieve upward social mobility (Simpson, 2017; Vernazza, 2013). The ability to migrate and integrate successfully, however, also depends on the individuals' age and the opportunities available in the destination country as well as the ability to bear the cost of migration (de Haas, 2021; Klabunde & Willekens, 2016). Younger migrants, particularly those who arrive before the age of 20, tend to achieve higher income and education levels compared to older migrants, a pattern attributed to their longer duration of residence and greater opportunities for integration (Colón-López et al., 2009; Gruber & Sand, 2020). In contrast, older migrants often face significant constraints, such as limited recognition of work experience gained in their home countries, which results in lower earnings compared to their younger counterparts (Alexander & Ward, 2018). Notably, low-income migrants, often face substantial obstacles, including inadequate housing, limited employment opportunities,

[9] Notably, Veenhoven (2008) argues that absolute income is vital as people with sufficient absolute income are better able to fulfill their needs.

and residence in neighborhoods with insufficient access to essential amenities and services (Lombard, 2021).

Employment

***Hypothesis* 5.** *Economic migrants move to fill labor market gaps.*

Support: Economic migrants are motivated by the opportunities created by labor market gaps (Cangiano, 2014; EC, 2015; Papademetriou et al., 2008), with employment prospects serving as a key factor in their migration decisions (Bartel, 1979). Bartel further emphasizes that migration decisions are closely related to employment stability, with longer job tenure reducing the likelihood of quitting or being laid off.

***Hypothesis* 6.** *Economic migrants predominantly work in the service sector. They often experience precarious working conditions and are economically worse off than natives, especially females.*

Support: Economic migrants mainly work in the manufacturing, construction, and agriculture sectors as well as in (low-wage) service industry occupations (Boski, 2013; Cholewinski & Pecoud, 2009; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). McDowell et al. (2009) show that migrants in service sectors, particularly in the UK, often work under precarious working conditions. They tend to be underpaid, overqualified, and receive no reciprocation for the total flexibility given to employers. Additionally, in Greece, Drydakis (2021) finds that precarious working conditions affect migrants' mental health. Yet, this phenomenon does not only affect economic migrants. McDowell et al. (2009) further show that in the UK, natives are also subject to these precarious working conditions. Cangiano (2014) draws attention to the bigger picture by highlighting that economic migrants cannot catch up with natives. Economic migrants often have an economic disadvantage compared to natives, especially when they are non-EU migrants or female. Overall, the participation of migrant women in the labor market is low. Kaestner et al. (2003) reveal that the reason can be found in destination countries'welfare regimes. When welfare rules are migration-friendly, low-educated women are more likely to ignore distance from home when searching for employment. Nonetheless, Kaestner et al. (2003) admit the existence of different results in the literature. Based on the fact that also low-educated women move in search of employment, I conclude that the typical picture of many migrants undertaking welfare migration, i.e., migration due to welfare generosity, is unfounded.[10] McKinnish (2007) and Godin (2020) support this conclusion.

***Hypothesis* 7.** *Economic migrants aspiring to self-employment feel motivated by higher expected income. Furthermore, good social support networks and balanced skill sets facilitate self-employment.*

Support: When moving for employment, economic migrants also choose self-employment instead of paid employment (Constant, 2014; Satalkina et al., 2022). Some scholars believe they do so to overcome employment obstacles, such as the difficulty of finding a job itself (Cui et al., 2013). However, when asking self-employed migrants for their motivations for choosing self-employment, the top 3 reasons found were: higher income, more flexibility and freedom, and the ability to be one's own boss. Few migrants choose self-employment because they could not find a job (Zhang & Zhao, 2015). Rees and Shah (1986), Li (2001), and Constant and Zimmermann (2006) partially agree, stating that higher income is the main reason. However, Petersen (1989) and Portes and Zhou (1996) argue that the higher average income is merely a consequence of longer working hours. Conversely, Hamilton (2000) does not observe a correlation between income and working hours. Overall, one can argue that self-employment is challenging. Zhang and Zhao (2015) conclude that social and family networks matter because they provide easy access to financial support and efficient advertising, i.e., word-of-mouth recommendations by friends and relatives. Concretely, Zhang and Zhao (2015) outline that each additional person in one's social network increases the probability of self-employment by 0.63 to 0.83 percent. Another factor supporting self-employment is human capital. Lazear (2004, 2005) shows that individuals with a more balanced skill set – regardless of whether they acquired it through education or through work experience – are more likely to become self-employed. Constant et al. (2007) compare natives and migrants in Germany and find that the latter has a higher probability of self-employment, but that ethnicity is decisive: Turkish nationals are more likely to become self-employed than other ethnic groups. Furthermore, they find that the self-employment probability changes with age. In short, the relationship between the two is concave: self-employment probability increases with age, yet declines after a peak. Thus, the average age of self-employed immigrants in Germany is 43.25 years.

Employment-related migration patterns and constraints: Strong interpersonal skills and commitment to the host country's culture support economic migrants' employment prospects. Employers often value soft skills, such as teamwork, social abilities, and cultural adaptability, over formal qualifications, particularly in regions like Europe (Farashah & Blomquist, 2020; C. F. Wright & Constantin, 2021). However, migrants from developing countries face considerable challenges due to negative perceptions about their origins, limiting their access to jobs that match their skills and qualifications (IOM 2024; Shirmohammadi et al., 2019). These biases particularly affect those from regions such as Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Former Soviet Union, while migrants from developed Western countries benefit from more favorable perceptions (Shirmohammadi et al., 2019). Female migrants, especially those migrating as spouses, face additional hurdles, including restrictive policies like pre-entry lan-

[10] Female migrants and low-educated migrants are commonly perceived to burden the welfare system (McKinnish, 2005; Razin & Wahba, 2015).

guage requirements that hinder their labor market entry, regardless of their qualifications (Cangiano, 2014). Furthermore, many migrants encounter systemic discrimination, as employers often undervalue or disregard work experience gained abroad, particularly from non-Western countries, resulting in underemployment or exclusion from roles aligned with their abilities (Shirmohammadi et al., 2019). Despite these obstacles, economic migrants remain highly committed employees and contribute significantly to host countries' labor markets (Bartel, 1979; IOM, 2019b; Paloma et al., 2021).

Beyond the purely economic motives of income and employment, broader economic considerations emerge as critical migration drivers, setting the stage for the discussion in the next subsection.

Economic-Related Motives

Economic-related motives – specifically corruption, amenities, and happiness – gain importance in migration research, reflecting individuals' aspirations for quality of life and societal stability.

Corruption

***Hypothesis* 8.** *Corruption serves as a push and as a pull factor for economic migrants, closely tied to the economic motive of expected income.*

Support: Corruption is positively correlated with emigration and negatively correlated with immigration (Arif, 2022). For example, a one-point decrease in corruption, as measured by the Corruption Perceptions Index, reduces emigration by 30 percent (Poprawe, 2015). While corruption-driven emigration would be less problematic in a scenario of balanced net migration – where emigration equals immigration – high-skill emigration remains particularly harmful, as it leads to brain drain and lowers the return on education (Ariu & Squicciarini, 2013).[11] Furthermore, corruption is deeply intertwined with income dynamics (Lapshyna, 2014; Poprawe, 2015). While other researchers agree, they draw different conclusions regarding the relationship between corruption and income (Zúñiga, 2017). To illustrate, Gupta et al. (2002) as well as Dincer and Gunalp (2012), claim that corruption causes income inequality, while Jong-Sung and Khagram (2005) as well as Uslaner (2008), argue that the reverse could also be true, in that high income inequality may cause corruption. This is especially true for individuals who wish to protect their personal privileges and resort to corruption to do so. For a general review of the interplay between corruption and migration, see Wheatland (2015).

***Hypothesis* 9.** *European countries are perceived to have low levels of corruption and are thus preferred destinations for economic migrants.*

Support: Lapshyna (2014) demonstrates that people prefer migrating to Europe since they perceive a low level of corruption there. On a related note, Dimant et al. (2015) find that corruption can be seen as a migrant's personal characteristic that impacts destination countries. More precisely, immigration from corruption-ridden origin countries promotes corruption in the destination country.

Corruption-related migration patterns and constraints: Corruption is a global problem (Myint, 2000) and affects sectors such as healthcare, education, labor markets, and entrepreneurship, commonly in the form of bribery (Lapshyna, 2014). This burden is particularly heavy for low-income individuals, who spend 2.3 percent of their income on bribes, compared to just 0.9 percent for wealthier individuals (Dincer & Gunalp, 2012). High-skilled individuals are especially motivated to emigrate in response to corruption. As corruption increases, emigration among high-skilled individuals rises, while migration among medium- and low-skilled individuals declines once corruption surpasses a certain threshold (Cooray & Schneider, 2016). Corruption exists in both real and perceived forms. While real corruption directly influences migration, perceived corruption often has more devastating effects, as it is sufficient to deter migration decisions (Melgar et al., 2010).

Amenities

***Hypothesis* 10.** *Economic migrants are motivated by a wide range of amenities that make their lives more livable.*

Support: Amenities are closely tied to quality-of-life considerations, encompassing anything that make life more pleasant and comfortable (Chipeniuk, 2004; McGarrigle, 2022). Amenity motives are inherently complex (A. S. Williams & Jobes, 1990) and can be classified into four main categories based on rural and urban dimensions (Büchler et al., 2021; T. N. Clark et al., 2002; Mulligan & Carruthers, 2011). The first group are natural – also called environmental– amenities like mountains, volcanoes, lakes, rivers, coastlines, forests, and climate (Brown & Scott, 2012; Rasker et al., 2009; Van Auken & Rye, 2011), whereas the second group are man-made amenities like well-maintained roads and parks, bars, restaurants, and recreation and shopping opportunities (Brown & Scott, 2012; Chi & Mracouiller, 2011; Chipeniuk, 2004). The third group, that of social amenities, refers to tangible and intangible features such as an open or tolerant society, good conditions for raising children, practicing or enjoying art, and warm human relations (Brown & Scott, 2012; Chipeniuk, 2004; L. Zheng, 2016). Finally, the fourth group consists of city amenities like population density, low crime rate, school quality, parks, museums, art galleries, orchestras, broadway musicals, theatre, signature buildings, and public services such as hos-

[11] The Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International ranks countries by their perceived levels of corruption based on expert assessments and opinion surveys. In the version by Poprawe (2015), it ranges from 0 to 10, with lower scores indicating higher corruption and vice versa. (The original range is 0 to 100.)

pitals, libraries or post offices (Cushing, 2004; Rupasingha & Goetz, 2004; L. Zheng, 2016).

***Hypothesis* 11.** *Rural-amenity economic migrants move to realize entrepreneurial dreams while urban-amenity economic migrants move to flee from a lack of amenities.*

Support: When migrants take up employment, movement to rural areas often occurs to perform entrepreneurial activities in the tourism sector, for example, when migrants start a tourism business (Hayes, 2015; Kuentzel & Ramaswamy, 2005). When migrants move to urban areas, they often do so to flee from a lack of amenities, i.e., emerging disamenities (Winkler & Rouleau, 2020). Disamenities are the opposite of amenities (Mulligan & Carruthers, 2011), defined as inferior amenities that are lower in value. They arise particularly in natural amenities, either caused by climate change which leads to natural hazards like earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding, or wildfires; or they exist naturally due to unfavorable conditions like extreme cold such as in the tundra or extreme heat such as in deserts (Albouy et al., 2016; Winkler & Rouleau, 2020). Disamenties in urban, man-made amenities are, for example, nuclear waste (Rupasingha & Goetz, 2004) or pollution (L. Zheng, 2016).

Amenity-related migration patterns and constraints: The desire for amenities increases with age (Chi & Mracouiller, 2011) and income (Graves & Linneman, 1979; Green, 2001). Consequently, amenity-motivated economic migrants are typically retired (Chi & Mracouiller, 2011; Chipeniuk, 2004; Ferguson et al., 2007; Hayes, 2015; Treyz et al., 1991), wealthy (Abrams et al., 2012; Chipeniuk, 2004; Croucher, 2012), or highly skilled (Brown & Scott, 2012; Büchler et al., 2021; Chipeniuk, 2004; Storper & Scott, 2009; L. Zheng, 2016). They prefer to move where other people already live, especially skilled migrants move to areas where they are surrounded by other skilled people (Büchler et al., 2021; L. Zheng, 2016). Recently, mountain regions in Europe have become popular destinations, demonstrating a willingness to pay premiums for desirable natural amenities (Bender & Kanitscheider, 2012). Other popular destinations include Norway (Flognfeldt, 2006), the Philippines (Glorioso, 2006), the Czech Republic (Bartoš et al., 2009), New Zealand (Hall, 2006), and Argentina (Otera et al., 2006). Living preferences often follow a path-dependent pattern, such as familiarity with specific climates or environments, even when these conditions are commonly considered less favorable (Albouy et al., 2021; Cushing, 2004). That is, for example, while most people prefer moderate climates with warm, sunny, and dry weather, some opt for cooler summers, as the unfamiliarity of the former can cause stress and impact mental health (Cushing, 2004; Rappaport, 2007). Preferences also vary across age groups and cultural backgrounds, underscoring the diversity in amenity-related migration patterns (Graves, 1979).

Happiness

***Hypothesis* 12.** *Economic migrants are driven by the desire for a happier life, with each individual having their own interpretation of happiness.*

Support: The extent of happiness rests in the eye of the beholder and thus depends on the individual's evaluation of how well their personal life is unfolding (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019). Happiness is typically measured using self-report instruments such as questionnaires or interviews (Veenhoven, 2017). In particular, individuals respond to single direct questions by ticking one of several answer options, often using Pavot and Diener's (1993) five-item *Satisfaction with Life Scale*. Several studies highlight that people migrate because they feel unhappy at home, including Nowok et al. (2011), Graham and Markowitz (2011), Chindarkar (2014), Grimes and Wesselbaum (2019), and Brzozowski and Coniglio (2021). In a more nuanced analysis, Bartram (2013a) argues that economic migrants might only believe that income makes them happier but may be misguided in this assumption, building on Gilbert (2006) and Bartolini et al. (2007), who document mistaken beliefs about achieving happiness. Hendriks and Bartram (2016) further support this, finding that mistaken beliefs contribute significantly to immigrants' disappointing migration outcomes. Additionally, de Jong et al. (2002) suggest that unrealistic and unfulfilled beliefs about the quality of life in destination countries or towns negatively impact migrants' happiness. Relatedly, Nowok et al. (2011) observe that migrants moving for employment tend to be happier than those migrating for other reasons, with Melzer (2011) showing that happiness often increases post-migration due to improved labor market outcomes. For a review of economic migrants' happiness determinants, see Paloma et al. (2021).

***Hypothesis* 13.** *Economic migrants face a happiness gap between poorer and wealthier destination countries.*

Support: People moving to more developed countries experience the largest happiness gains (Hendriks et al., 2018; IOM, 2013). After comparing 141 countries, the top 5 happiest countries are Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and Switzerland, whereas the top 5 unhappiest are Ukraine, Yemen, Syria, Malawi, and Venezuela (Helliwell, Huang, et al., 2018).[12] Thus, it can be seen that, generally, people in poor – i.e., low GDP per capita, low-income – countries are less happy compared to those in wealthy – i.e., high GDP per capita, high-income – countries (Polgreen & Simpson, 2011; Ventura, 2021; World Population Review, 2021). The results of Diener (2008) also support this conclusion. Correspondingly, Melzer (2011) shows that migrating to wealthy regions increases happiness, while Bartram (2015) shows that migrants moving from

[12] The country's level of happiness is assessed via aggregation of individual-level data such that happy countries are defined as those hosting mostly happy people, while unhappy countries are those hosting mostly unhappy people (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018; Hudson et al., 2020).

wealthier to poorer countries on average experience decreased happiness (however, note that Hendriks et al., 2018, find a null effect). The reason why people in wealthy countries are happier may be that these countries are more livable, i.e., that the living conditions are good. Economic migrants, when asked about their migration motives, prefer living in a livable environment (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019). The reason for the decrease in happiness when moving to poor countries may be unfulfilled expectations or that a positive impact on happiness is outweighed by the negative impact of the difficulty of integrating into the new society. Hendriks et al. (2016) confirm the latter by showing that the social climate is important. The 2018 World Happiness Report reaches the same conclusion (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018). Nonetheless, moving to a wealthy country alone neither generates nor guarantees happiness, as migration is a longitudinal process that unfolds over many years (Bartram, 2011). Data, with a focal point on happiness, before and after migration must be considered to evaluate the migration impacts. Furthermore, a significant proportion of migrants also move between countries at similar levels of economic development (Ratha & Shaw, 2007).

***Hypothesis* 14.** *Economic migrants are less happy than natives in the destination country but happier than stayers in the home country.*

Support: Researchers comparing the happiness of migrants with that of natives in the destination country find that the former are less happy (Bălţătescu, 2007; Bartram, 2013a; Constant et al., 2012; Hendriks & Bartram, 2016; Obućina, 2013; Safi, 2010; Werkuyten & Nekuee, 1999; G. Zheng et al., 2022). Kóczán (2016) discovers that lower happiness levels are due to employment-related issues such as education-occupation matching or job security, whereas Bartram (2013a) demonstrates that the reason for migrants' lower levels of happiness stems from the change in the reference group they compare themselves to: migrants no longer compare themselves with stayers in the home country (i.e., non-migrants), but rather with natives in their chosen destination country. Bartram's argument rings true, especially because Erlinghagen (2011) and Hendriks et al. (2018) find that migrants are happier than stayers.[13] Furthermore, migrants are more optimistic than stayers (Ek et al., 2008; Simpson, 2017). More generally, Firebaugh and Schroeder (2009) argue that migrants mainly compare themselves with locals, while Gelatt (2013) finds that migrants compare themselves to both natives and stayers.

***Hypothesis* 15.** *Economic migrants follow the eudaimonic lifestyle.*

Support: Derived from the literature on subjective well-being and positive psychology, Boski (2013) formulates four lifestyles: *eudaimonia*, *hedonism*, *self-sacrifice*, and *alienation*. These lifestyles differ in their characteristics regarding the relationship between 'Delayed Gratification' and 'Intrinsic (Autonomous) Satisfaction with an Activity'. Both variables can be described as either high or low. In terms of the former, high refers to future satisfaction and low refers to immediate satisfaction. These orientations vary in state depending on relations with the latter and the type of lifestyle. Using a questionnaire based on theoretical assumptions of the aforementioned lifestyles, Boski (2013) finds that the dominant lifestyle among economic migrants is eudaimonia, where people live according to their true selves. This occurs when lifestyle activities and personal values align (Waterman, 1993). Hence, activities are then seen as meaningful, consequentially creating a positive relationship between eudaimonia and happiness (Boski, 2013). Conclusively, economic migrants aspire to live a fulfilling life.

Happiness-related migration patterns and constraints: Individuals from both happy and unhappy countries are likely to emigrate (Polgreen & Simpson, 2011). However, people from unhappy countries are more likely to migrate than their happier cohorts (Grimes & Wesselbaum, 2019), often seeking to improve their well-being thorugh migration (Grimes et al., 2014; Polgreen & Simpson, 2011). In contrast, happy migrants are driven by optimism (W. F. Wright & Bower, 1992) and a desire for better opportunities abroad (Polgreen & Simpson, 2011). After migration, those who fulfill basic needs report increased happiness, while others experience mental strain from challenges such as family separation (Hendriks et al., 2018) or lack of social contacts (Arpino & de Valk, 2018). Consequently, happier migrants are more likely to settle permanently in their host countries (Mara & Landesmann, 2013; Shamsuddin & Katsaiti, 2020), with happiness having a smaller impact on internal migration than international migration due to fewer cultural or linguistic differences within countries (Hendriks & Burger, 2021). During their lifespan, migrants are least happy in middle age, with happiness reaching its lowest point around age 48 (Blanchflower, 2021; Nowok et al., 2011)[14]. Minority and immigrant groups are often unhappier compared to the native-born majority (Kushnirovich & Sherman, 2018), especially those aged 50 and older (Amit, 2010). Reasons are attributed to factors such as economic status, social capital, health, and self-identity, which is defined as how individuals perceive themselves in relation to societal groups or categories (Amit, 2010, 2012; Amit & Litwin, 2010). Notably, wealthy individuals migrate more frequently, as economic disparities significantly constrain migration, especially for unhappy individuals in low-income countries, where financial costs pose

[13] Although Bartram (2013a, 2013b) demonstrates that the reason why migrants are less happy than natives is the change in the reference group, he finds no difference in the happiness levels of migrants and stayers. In other words, he finds migrants to be as happy as stayers. Yet, Hendriks and Burger (2021) argue that the reason could be grounded in Bartram's methodology.

[14] Blanchflower examines this relationship in 145 advanced and developing countries. To minimize the issue of possible differential response rates among older people, along with the concern that happy people live longer, he excludes older people from his analysis. In particular, he focuses his analysis on people from early adulthood – usually age 18, but in some samples 15 – to under the age of 70. He finds a minimum at age 48.3 across poor and rich countries

a greater barrier compared to high-income countries (Bartram, 2011; Hendriks & Burger, 2021; Migali & Scipioni, 2019).

Having discussed all motives the next section delves into their relative importance and interconnections.

Relative Importance of Motives and their Interconnections

Numerous studies have examined migrants and their motives. Overall, I identify the economic motives as the main focus of migration research (Brzozowski & Coniglio, 2021; Jennissen, 2003; Ortega & Peri, 2013) while only a small number of researchers investigate economic-related motives (Grimes & Wesselbaum, 2019).

Ranking these motives, however, is challenging due to variations in their importance across different migration contexts, ethical considerations, and individual preferences. With respect to my literature review, the findings support the following general ranking, with a *reasoning for the rank* provided below each motive:[15]

A. Expected Income

Surveys consistently identify higher income prospects as the primary driver of migration, particularly for economic migrants. Expected income provides direct financial incentives and underpins long-term goals like remittances and family support.

B. Employment

Employment is closely linked to income but serves as the immediate pathway to achieving financial goals. The availability of suitable jobs in destination countries is a critical pull factor, especially for skilled migrants.

C. Happiness

While traditionally underexplored, happiness is gaining recognition as a significant driver, particularly for migrants seeking improved well-being or escaping dissatisfaction in their home countries.

D. Amenities

Access to better living conditions, healthcare, and recreational facilities plays a growing role, especially among migrants prioritizing quality of life over purely economic gains.

E. Corruption

While corruption is a strong push factor in origin countries, it tends to act indirectly by reducing economic and social opportunities. Its impact is more pronounced among skilled migrants and those seeking stable governance.

Beyond their individual importance, these motives interlink, as illustrated in Table 2.

A closer look at the presented motives reveals a typical profile of economic migrants, as outlined in the next subsection.

Profile of Economic Migrants

The typical economic migrant is between 16 and 65 years of age, male, wealthy, and highly skilled; the latter is independent of whether these skills are gained from tertiary education or from work experience. Developing countries are the main destinations, with Europe being the main destination for international migrants, while America has the highest flow of internal migrants. In general, economic migrants move voluntarily to improve their quality of life. Their motives are economic or economic-related. Economic motives are 'expected income' and 'employment', and economic-related motives are 'corruption', 'amenities', and 'happiness'. The motives crucial in the migration decision are individually determined and vary over time, distance, and across countries; they are further influenced by the socio-demographic factors of 'age' and 'education'. High-skill migrants are more likely to migrate because they are more welcomed by natives and bear migration costs more easily.

Economic migrants – irrespective of their employment status (self-employment or paid employment) – move at the age of 20, mostly to increase their expected relative income. If this income fulfills their needs, they stay permanently rather than move back home. Income increases with age due to increased work experience (this is also the case for natives and non-migrants); most of the income earned is used for remittances, in addition to a trend of increasing investment income. Both self-employed and paid employed economic migrants mainly work in services. Although the latter are seen as long-term, committed employees, their income is mostly low, and working conditions are often precarious. This precarity is also reflected in the living conditions of economic migrants. They often live in neighborhoods with limited access to local amenities and services. In general, economic migrants prefer to live where other economic migrants live. High-skill economic migrants prefer the presence of other skilled migrants and of skilled people in general.

In light of their age, younger economic migrants are more likely to reap economic and social post-migration benefits as they more easily adapt to destination circumstances. Nonetheless, economic migrants are often worse off than natives due to discrimination. Social networks, however, help them to integrate into the destination country. In terms of employment, the self-employed benefit from both efficient advertising and financial support while the paid employed benefit from the latter; this is a fact that may be of particular importance for low-skill migrants since poor educational attainment dampens the means of legal migration. As people age, moving becomes rare. When it occurs, it is usually for amenities. Amenities, however, do not need to be of high value as economic migrants also move for low-valued amenities that are reminiscent of home. High-skill and wealthy economic migrants are also motivated by amenities.

Overall, economic migrants strive for happiness – they are called frustrated achievers – and most of them

[15] I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting that the value of a review lies not only in summarizing a large body of research but also in interpreting its findings.

Table 2. Interconnection of migration motives

Comparison	Interconnection
Expected Income vs. Employment	Both are foundational drivers. Employment is the pathway to income. Income is the ultimate driver; employment facilitates achieving it.
Expected Income vs. Happiness	Income stability enhances happiness. Income is the primary motivator; happiness is an overarching goal linked to income.
Employment vs. Happiness	Stable employment improves happiness. Employment is the stronger driver, while happiness reinforces its importance.
Expected Income vs. Corruption	Corruption creates dissatisfaction, driving income-seekers to fairer systems. Income is a direct motivator; corruption amplifies income motivation.
Employment vs. Corruption	Employment is critical; corruption hinders it. Corruption limits access to quality jobs, prompting migration. Employment is the primary pull factor; corruption reinforces dissatisfaction.
Happiness vs. Corruption	Happiness is an overarching goal. Corruption undermines happiness, prompting migration to transparent systems. Happiness is the desired outcome; corruption acts as a push factor.
Amenities vs. Expected Income	Income is essential for accessing amenities. Amenities attract wealthier migrants; income is the prerequisite. Income is the stronger driver; amenities enhance migration for those with sufficient income.
Amenities vs. Happiness	Happiness is a broader motivator. Amenities enhance quality of life and contribute to happiness. Happiness is the ultimate goal; amenities are a tangible factor influencing destination choice.

Note: The interconnection illustrates the relationships between motives, offering a clear and concise explanation of how they are connected.

are happy after migration; those who are not, consider returning home. In any case, economic migrants are less happy than natives but happier than stayers. They live a eudaimonic lifestyle where they want their life activities to align with their true values to achieve a meaningful life.

Summary and Conclusion

The review at hand taps into the dynamic decision-making process of economic migrants by identifying their motives for moving within and across national boundaries. It integrates theoretical, analytical, and empirical research, aiming to encompass all relevant studies on this topic. This integrative approach fills gaps in the existing literature by highlighting how traditional economic motives, such as income and employment, interact with less-explored drivers, including happiness, corruption, and amenities. By providing a comprehensive, interdisciplinary overview, this review seeks to contribute meaningfully to both scholarly discourse and policy-making literature.

Key findings reveal a typical profile of economic migrants. These individuals move within and across national boundaries driven by a combination of economic motives, such as expected income and employment, and economic-related motives, including corruption, amenities, and happiness. While economic motives are closely tied to the pursuit of wealth, economic-related motives reflect broader quality-of-life considerations. All motives are interconnected, allowing for the following relative ranking of their importance: expected income, employment, happiness, amenities, and corruption. Economic migrants are predominantly of working age, male, wealthy, and highly educated, with aspirations oriented toward developed countries and a focus on achieving a meaning-oriented lifestyle. Their primary goal is to improve their quality of life. Unlike refugees, economic migrants move voluntarily and are not entitled to asylum status. Nonetheless, economic migrants are often confused with refugees due to similarities in their aspirations. This confusion, coupled with xenophobic sentiments, poses challenges for migrants, particularly those from developing countries. Within this context, this paper posits that the economic-related motive of corruption may significantly contribute to xenophobic attitudes against migrants from developing regions. Corruption disproportionately affects developing countries, and natives in host countries may fear that it could be introduced into their own societies by incoming migrants (Fleming, 2019). Overall, economic migrants favor developed regions, particularly North America and Europe, where their migration helps address demographic challenges like aging populations, highlighting their economic and social significance (Marois et al., 2020; OECD, 2019; Scott & Tegunimataka, 2020).

Strength of Evidence and Overarching Trends

The evidence supporting migration motives varies significantly in strength. Economic factors, particularly expected income and employment, are well-documented, with a strong consensus highlighting their central role as primary drivers of migration (Brzozowski & Coniglio, 2021; Jennissen, 2003; Ortega & Peri, 2013). Studies consistently show that income differentials and job availability are critical determinants of migration flows, with expected income serving as the ultimate incentive and employment functioning as the primary pathway to financial stability. In contrast, research on economic-related motives is comparatively limited but gaining attention. Corruption, for instance, is widely recognized as a push factor, particularly for its role in eroding trust and limiting opportunities in origin countries (Carling et al., 2015; Dimant et al., 2013). Similarly, amenities – encompassing natural, cultural, and social attractions – have become a growing focus, especially for high-income and older migrants seeking quality-of-life improvements (Albouy et al., 2021; Matarrita-Cascante & Suess, 2020). Happiness, too, is increasingly acknowledged as a dual migration driver, pushing individuals away from unhappy contexts and pulling optimistic individuals toward better opportunities (Betz & Simpson, 2013; Brzozowski & Coniglio, 2021; Hendriks & Burger, 2021; Polgreen & Simpson, 2011). The socio-demographic factors of age and education mediate both economic and economic-related motives. Younger and highly educated individuals are more likely to migrate and integrate successfully into host societies. However, research on the relationship between education and migration is less extensive than that on age, though both are universally relevant (Greenwood, 1997). Notably, studies on age-specific migration, particularly among older adults aged 50 and above, remain scarce despite their growing relevance in an aging global population (Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2016; IOM, 2021b; Millington, 2000; Newbold, 2018).

Recent shifts in migration research reflect broader societal trends, with an evolving focus on economic-related motives such as happiness and amenities, alongside traditional economic drivers. This shift underscores a growing recognition of migration as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by psychological, environmental, and cultural factors (Cormos, 2022; Wang & Giovanis, 2024). Future research should continue exploring these underexamined areas to develop a more comprehensive understanding of migration dynamics. Furthermore, a comprehensive literature review focused exclusively on empirical findings about economic migrants' motives is needed to deepen understanding of their decision-making processes. Such a review should differentiate motives by gender (male, female) and by type of migration (internal, international) to identify patterns with specific policy implications. Additionally, a detailed analysis of economic migrants' impacts on both home and destination countries is essential to evaluate the broader social and economic outcomes of migration. Particular attention should also be given to the motive of happiness, which is increasingly important in light of the global prevalence of humanitarian crises. By addressing these gaps, research can better inform evidence-based policies and provide a more nuanced understanding of migration dynamics.

Policy Implications

Modern societies face increasingly complex challenges, including economic migration, which requires well-informed and effective policy responses. The research at hand translates scholarly findings into actionable guidance for policymakers, addressing migration dynamics with a focus on practical solutions. A key contribution of this study is its provision of a framework to distinguish more easily between economic migrants and refugees – an essential step in developing tailored policies.

The presented findings emphasize the motives most influential for different types of migrants (e.g., skilled, low-income) and highlight the preferences of migrants driven by happiness and quality-of-life considerations. These insights provide a foundation for designing urban planning, labor market strategies, and integration policies. Properly integrated, economic migrants can positively impact the economic and social systems of both origin and destination countries (Bastia & Piper, 2019; Berry & Hou, 2016; Hübschmann, 2015; Kóczán et al., 2021; UNDP, 2009). Based on these findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- *Facilitate early labor market integration:* Remove barriers such as credential recognition delays and bureaucratic restrictions to enable swift workforce inclusion. Early integration enhances economic productivity and fosters social cohesion.
- *Implement anti-discrimination programs:* Develop robust measures to combat discrimination and promote inclusivity, ensuring equitable opportunities and socially fair outcomes for migrants. Public attitudes toward economic migrants, particularly highly skilled individuals (Reinold & Siegel, 2024), significantly affect their willingness to relocate and integrate (Cheng et al., 2013; Frank & Hou, 2017; Godin, 2020; Hernandez, 2024; Mitterbacher et al., 2024).
- *Pursue labor market reforms:* Address wage disparities and create equitable job opportunities through targeted reforms. These measures ensure fair employment practices and pathways for career advancement, benefiting both migrants and local economies.
- *Invest in mental health and quality-of-life programs:* Recognize the growing importance of happiness and emotional well-being as migration drivers. Provide mental health support, foster community engagement, and enhance quality-of-life initiatives to improve long-term integration outcomes. Policies promoting full employment, even in low-GDP contexts, can significantly enhance happiness (Easterlin, 2013, 2021).

• *Prioritize migrant-centered urban planning:* Design urban environments with affordable housing, accessible education, and efficient transportation to create livable and inclusive communities for migrants.

These evidence-based strategies address both economic and social dimensions, maximizing the benefits of migration for modern societies. Smart policies can also play a pivotal role in addressing the demographic challenges posed by aging populations (Marois et al., 2020; Scott & Tegunimataka, 2020), particularly in North America and Europe (OECD, 2019; UN DESA, 2020), which remain preferred destinations for economic migrants.

Finally, fostering a deeper understanding of economic migrants' motives is crucial for building cohesive and pluralistic societies. Learning about oneself and others is a cornerstone of successful coexistence (Gómez Ramos, 2022; Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin, 2017). Thus, a better understanding of migration dynamics contributes not only to policy effectiveness but also to mutually beneficial relationships between migrants and host communities.

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