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Mobility Equity in a Globalized World: Reducing Inequalities in the Sustainable Development Agenda

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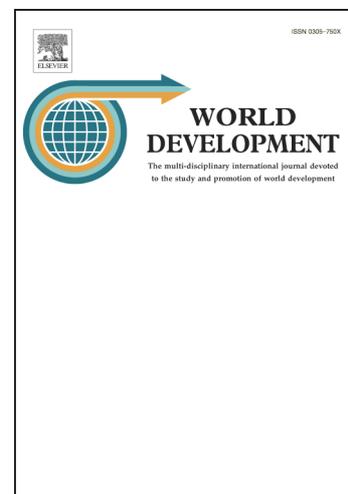
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## Mobility Equity in a Globalized World

### Reducing Inequalities in the Sustainable Development Agenda

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**Abstract:** *Mobility Equity in a Globalized World: Reducing Inequalities in the Sustainable Development Agenda*

Human mobility and inequality have determined one another throughout modern history, from the effects of labour migration to processes of urbanisation. The Sustainable Development Goals now offer an opportunity to re-examine this complex relationship in a globalized world. Drawing on major research evidence and key debates, this review article proposes a framework of mobility equity as part of SDG 10, which foresees the reduction of inequalities within and among countries by 2030.

The main question addressed is how forms of social, human and digital mobility, including migration, can contribute to reduced inequalities and positive development outcomes. The reviewed research underpins the need for an approach that prioritizes equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes. Mobility equity offers such an approach and rests on two main foundations: people's

equal capacity and freedom to be mobile in empowering ways, and the equal and inclusive regulation of mobility in all its forms, including human, social and digital mobility. The approach goes beyond income inequality and migrants' remittances to incorporate the differential mobility capacities among people in different contexts. This includes categorically excluded groups such as refugees, racialized minorities, and lower castes, but also tens of millions of workers in the global digital economy. As part of a special issue on new SDG Perspectives, the article provides new ideas for thinking about research and policy-making within the wider inequality-mobility nexus of global development.

**Keywords:** Mobility, inequality, equity, migration, SDGs, globalisation

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### Abstract

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout human history, moving elsewhere fundamentally changed countless lives and determined people's social and economic positions at both ends of the journey. As mass migration into Shanghai doubled its population from 1980 to 2010, so did Manchester's from 1811 to 1841: movements that undoubtedly created socioeconomic opportunities for many, and yet they also accentuated inequalities. Think about the tribulations of Manchester's 19<sup>th</sup> century working class life, or the expanding slums of contemporary "arrival cities" that offer little chances for urban upward mobility (Saunders, 2011). Human mobility and inequality are inseparably linked. Yet, it is surprisingly difficult to unpack the precise nature of this linkage. Increased or reduced inequality is one possible outcome of human mobility, as the movement of people often creates or reinforces difference and inequality, as well as blending or erasing such differences (Salazar, 2013). At the same time, inequality is one of the driving forces behind mobility: a lack of opportunity pushes people out of rural areas into cities, from where they often move onwards and become international migrants (Kuptsch, 2015, p. 343). Global inequality – or inequality between countries and regions – continues to trigger population movements from developing countries, generating remittances that outweigh official aid.

Without doubt, mobility and inequality are mutually implicated in a myriad of ways. The question is how this complex entanglement can be conceptualised meaningfully and coherently, in order to find answers to the underlying key questions: How can migration and human mobility reduce inequalities between and within countries? How can human mobility be regulated in ways that contribute to sustainable development? What, if anything, is *mobility equity*?

These questions gain relevance in light of Sustainable Development Goal 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries at a time of deepening global interconnectedness. Against this backdrop, a coherent conceptual framework is needed that builds on empirical evidence and the literature on the mobility-inequality nexus, situated within global sustainable development as part of an SDG Perspectives special issue published in this journal. This framework of *mobility equity* rests in two main pillars: to ensure people enjoy equal mobility opportunities, including the freedom to choose whether or not to move; and the creation of just and inclusive mobility regimes that can contribute to equality of outcomes and wider sustainable development.

Although migration is a central component, mobility equity reaches beyond migration to include diverse forms of *human mobility*, such as labour commuting and new digital mobilities of labour. On a second level, speaking of mobility rather than migration integrates *social mobility* into the wider framework, instead of seeing it as a separate issue. Reducing inequality in sustainable ways often depends on whether or not people can transform human mobility into social and economic upward mobility. This is not to say that people always decide to move for socio-economic reasons, considering forced exiles who have no choice, alongside those who seek freedom and a different life elsewhere without social upward mobility in mind. As a very particular field of policy making and governance, *migration* cannot capture the diverse human experience of human mobility and immobility, its unequal regulation by political and economic regimes, and its embeddedness in various social and cultural contexts. Mobility, as a critical concept, further avoids the 'methodological nationalism' that has long taken nation-states as the only units of migration analysis

(Salazar & Glick Schiller, 2014, p. 10). Analytically, mobility incorporates the movement of people and labour across scales and places it in relationship to the regimes that govern it unequally.

This review brings three sets of largely disconnected literature in conversation with one another: policy-oriented publications on the SDGs and SDG 10; the interdisciplinary literature that has conceptualised mobility in relation to global inequality; and the multi-disciplinary research evidence from qualitative case studies and quantitative research about inequality, migration and social mobility in the contemporary world. This conversation uses the productive tension between theory, research evidence, and policy-oriented debates.

The following section will position the framework within the SDGs and the momentum they create around mobility and inequality, before reviewing major approaches to inequality. The mobility framework is then conceptualised more clearly, followed by a review of research in three main areas: migration, social mobility, and digital mobility. The final section will conceptualise the framework of *mobility equity* in order to discuss its policy implications and potential applications, followed by brief concluding remarks with recommendations for future research.

Mobility equity ultimately emerges as a necessary precursor of reduced inequalities in a globalized world. Although contingent on variation in cultural context, political economy and individual background, mobility equity builds on the just distribution of mobility opportunities. This necessarily includes people's freedom to choose whether or not to move, alongside the establishment of fair regimes that govern mobility in inclusive ways without undermining people's agency and freedom. Developing concerted policies that work towards mobility equity across regional, national and global scales poses major challenges – especially if no one is to be left behind.

## 2. SDGs and the inequality-mobility momentum

This review comes at a time when a steady rise in income and wealth inequalities has put the problem of inequality high up on the global SDG agenda. For long inequality has been overshadowed by the dominance of poverty in development debates since World War II (Escobar, 2011); and the SDGs predecessors, the MDGs, had a “blind spot” with regard to inequality and social injustice, and probably even worsened inequalities in some places (Anderson, 2016). This has changed: inequality and mobility are moving centre stage in the global development agenda. Not only is there now an SDG for reducing inequality, but the SDGs overall accorded migration a more prominent role. This is partly owed to “lobbying” by IOM, UN agencies, and the World Bank (Bakewell, 2015). Moreover, inequality is a component of almost all other SDGs, such as “no poverty”, “gender equality”, and “decent work and economic growth”. The role of sustainable and just forms of mobility is less explicit, but nevertheless crucial to the fulfilment of several other goals, such as “quality education”, “climate action”, as well as decent work and growth. These connections offer an opportunity to rethink the relationship between inequality and mobility in the context of the SDGs.

As any policy attempt of its scale, the SDGs had already attracted criticism before their official release. Some saw them as a framework premised upon continuing destructive capitalism and unsustainable consumption. In a world that is “overheating”, overcrowding and accelerating, the tension between growth and ecology has become increasingly visible (Eriksen, 2016). Ending poverty and reducing inequality may eventually require actors to move towards sustainable consumption and production in parallel (Griggs et al., 2014). This includes the growing carbon footprint of international travel and the environmental costs of digital technology. Taking these limitations into account, the implicit *connection* between migration and inequality within the development agenda, which is not explicitly developed, opens important opportunities to do so. This may open the traditionally national policy area of inequality up for international action, not least because mobility

embodies the global interconnectedness of phenomena that are widely considered to be domestic policy issues.

One hope is that SDG 10 could increase the “mobility of policies”, in the sense of making policies in different arenas mutually implicated and better connected. It may lead to coordinated action across scales, in the spirit of the SDG agenda being a response to “growing economic, social, and planetary complexity in the twenty-first century” (Kanie, Bernstein, Biermann, & Haas, 2017). This global complexity makes inequality *within* countries both a universal and a systemic problem, with widely recognized negative impacts on society, health and political stability (Chancel, Hough, & Voituriez, 2017). Moreover, the more globalized the world becomes, the more that the reasons why we should be concerned about within-country inequalities also apply between countries (Wade 2004). Growing recognition of this impact has driven the UN and other global actors to call on states to formulate nationally specific implementation strategies, and mobility-oriented approaches must form part of such efforts.

Yet, one problem of SDG 10 remains that no measurable target clearly outlines how far each country must reduce inequality, which is complicated by the different layers and types of inequality: inequality within or between countries, between individuals or groups, and inequality of opportunity or outcomes? Indeed, vertical inequality between individuals does not have the same effects as horizontal inequality between groups, which can fuel conflict and instability (Keen, 2012; Stewart, 2008). People also respond in diverse ways as they cope with the emotions and grievances that inequality engenders (Barford, 2017).

In light of inequality’s multidimensional nature – even if mobility is not considered – few proposals for measured targets informed SDG 10, such as those based on the Gini coefficient or the Palma index.<sup>1</sup> Currently, the only measurable target, 10.1, remains that of sustaining income growth in the bottom 40 percent of population at a higher rate than the national average; this “minimum requirement” allows each government to define how and how far inequality is to be reduced by

2030 (Anderson, 2016). Moreover, a major problem remains the lack of a specific target for reducing global income inequality. Around two-thirds of income inequality at the global level is a matter of inequality between countries, as opposed to inequality within countries (Milanovic, 2007, 2012). According to the *World Inequality Report*, global income inequality and national policies are highly interdependent: Income inequality has increased in nearly all world regions in recent decades, but to very different degrees depending on national policies and institutions, as the radically diverging trajectories of the EU and the USA reveal (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2018). This accords policy-making a central role in reshaping inequality even where overall sustainable development objectives are not met.

Moreover, income inequality between countries and inequality within countries could be at times partly competing forces: while strong economic growth in China and India contributed to decreased inequality between countries globally, it meant that inequality within these countries rose sharply; the top 1% income share rose from 7% to 22% in India, and 6% to 14% in China between 1980 and 2016; one implication is that the often assumed correlation between growth and inequality does not hold: between 1980 and 2016, inequality between the world's citizens increased, despite strong growth in emerging market (Chancel, 2018). High economic growth at the top does not usually trickle down.

The opportunity for policy-makers is that reduced inequalities will likely have significant benefits for sustainable development. Indeed, population health tends to be better in societies where income is more equally distributed; and "social problems" that worsen with increasing inequality include mental illness, violence, imprisonment, lack of trust, teenage births, obesity, drug abuse, and poor educational performance of schoolchildren (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009a). More equal societies "almost always do better" (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009b). Inequality is a health problem, an economic problem, can lead to political instability, and to some extent it is also an environmental issue (Chancel et al., 2017, p. 11).

Despite these incentives to do more, the progress in reducing inequality within and among countries has so far been “mixed”, even if tested against the narrow indicators of SDG 10: the voices of developing countries still need to be strengthened in decision-making forums of international economic and financial institutions, while policies have had little impact on high transaction costs of remittances (ECOSOC, 2017). Admittedly, it is too early to draw conclusions, but still early enough to identify opportunities for research and policy design. This process should inform a better understanding of the challenges behind the SDGs, which provide a focused pathway through goal-setting that helps national governments and other actors to establish priorities around identified targets. They are designed as a form of governance through steering actors towards desired outcomes and goals (Young, 2017).

Meanwhile, human mobility is only directly addressed by two targets of SDG 10: “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies”, and “reduce (...) transaction costs of migrant remittances”. Yet, the inequality-mobility relationship goes far beyond migration in the narrow sense of these two targets. Mobility is immediately relevant within a number of other stated issues, among them income inequality, and especially the social, political and economic inclusion of all (target 10.2), as well as the unequal distribution of opportunities.

On first site, this overall lack of a realistic and numerically measurable target for reduced inequalities appears to be an obstacle for concrete policy initiatives around mobility. However, it could also be seen as an opportunity to frame inequality beyond measure, income, and material wealth: the lack of a definite measure reflects the fact that inequality is a relative and relational problem with both local and national dimensions. Inequality is social and relational by definition (Milanovic, 2012, p. ix; Mosse, 2010). This relational quality is also reflected by David LeBlanc’s (2015) ranking of “inequality” as second among 17 SDGs in terms of “connectivity”, meaning it is

closely linked to most other development goals. A framework of mobility offers a crucial opportunity to approach this complexity and connect the problem of inequality across scales and policy arenas.

### 3. Conceptualising unequal mobility

The concept of *mobility* has not always been part of the development vocabulary, mostly due to the prominence of migration. In the social sciences, researchers have long associated mobility with transportation and urban policy, introducing terms such as “mobility equity” and “sustainable mobility” (Gudmundsson & Höjer, 1996). With its own specialized field of multi-disciplinary research, mobility is now widely theorized and conceptualised in relation to important keywords of inequality, including capital, gender, immobility, motility, and regime (Salazar & Jayaram, 2016). While mobility theory is concerned with all sorts of ‘moving people’, from the forced exile to the urban flâneur, this article has its focus on three forms of mobility that are closely associated with sustainable development and inequality: labour migration, social mobility, and digital mobility. While labour migration is primarily spatial, social mobility is concerned with the upward movement of people in terms of social and economic classes or hierarchies. Digital mobility is spatial too, but it refers to the mobility of work rather than workers. All three forms of mobility fundamentally shape inequality in today’s world.

There is surprising synergy between the SDGs recognition of inequality and mobility’s significance on the one hand, and the evolution of mobility as a core concept of global inequality. This evolution includes the critique of three long-held assumptions about mobility: the idea that there is increasing mobility globally; that mobility is a self-evident phenomenon; and that movement generates positive change and an improvement of oneself (Salazar & Jayaram, 2016, pp. 2–3). However, mobility does not equal freedom, nor is this an unprecedented age of hypermobile people. Importantly, critical mobility theory sees inequality and immobility as inseparably linked. This suggests the need for a distancing from the prominent approaches cultivated around the turn of the millennium that spoke of “flows”, fluid identities and networked transnational societies (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2000;

Rapport & Dawson, 1998). Grounding a mobility framework in inequality ultimately counters the lasting impact of perspectives that advocate a “de-territorialization” of development policies in response to seemingly growing global mobility (Nijenhuis & Leung, 2017). Mobility may be on the rise, but very unequally so.

A mobility-inequality framework for sustainable development will need to ground global processes in “territorial” specifics, including the unequal distribution of access to mobility. This includes marginalized groups that are excluded from social mobility and migration channels. It also refers to a mobility bias between different locations. Research on Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, refers to a “tarmac bias” to express the marginalization of those living off-road (Porter, 2002). Well-managed migration necessitates policies that cross borders while being grounded in the cultural and political context of places. Geography then matters both less and more, because the opportunities of mobility coexist alongside deeply rooted exclusion and immobility within the same regimes (Hackl, Schwarz, Gutekunst, & Leoncini, 2016; Salazar & Smart, 2011). Mobility and immobility thus have an intimate relationship, as the freedom to move for some builds on the unfreedom and immobility of others; the mobility of ‘qualified’ travellers stands vis-à-vis the mobility of ‘unqualified’ travellers (Abram, Feldman Bianco, Khosravi, Salazar, & de Genova, 2017, p. 132).

These diverging opportunities are reflected in the concept of *motility*, which expresses people’s varying *capacities* and *potentials* to move (Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004; Leivestad, 2016). *Mobility capacity* is linked to human capital models that seek to achieve ‘parity’ through ensuring equal access and opportunities among minority members, for example through non-discrimination policies (Meerman, 2001, p. 1460). This is crucial for mobility equity, access to which will depend on the different mobility capacities people have, including their skills, legal status, access to transport, gender identity, aspirations, and financial situation. Moreover, overarching regimes further determine the mobility of people – regimes understood here as “rationalized systems” for the regulation of movement (Baker, 2016, p. 153).

A regime can be a legal framework along borders, or the post-9/11 “paradigm of suspicion” that classified freedom of movement primarily as a risk (Shamir, 2005). This regime approach formalizes a critique of methodological nationalism, asking: “What do we see if we do not think about mobility like a nation-state?” (Salazar & Glick Schiller, 2014). Although inherently connected to nation states as actors and key policy-makers, a framework of mobility equity builds on the regime approach to connect the level of individual opportunity, as reflected in *motility*, with that of transnational mobility governance and regulation.

Moreover, mobility *equity* acknowledges that equity and equality diverge in important ways: equality implies the condition of being equal in quantity, number, or value, for example, in allocating a resource, or dividing a profit; equity, on the other hand, implies a deeper sense of fairness and justice (Cochran & Ray, 2009). The World Bank (2006) invoked equity to state that individuals should have equal opportunities to pursue a life of their choosing and be spared from extreme deprivation in outcomes; but from an equity perspective, the distribution of opportunities matters more than the distribution of outcomes. Essentially, equality of opportunity implies that reducing inequalities must focus on the *distribution* of capacities, economic opportunities, and political voices, rather than primarily on income gaps (“the outcome”). The underlying power inequality is central for our understanding of why some people can control situations of mobility and fixity, while others cannot (Rogaly, 2015). Indeed, some people are in charge of mobility and while others some are effectively imprisoned by it (Massey, 1993, p. 61). This duality of mobility as freedom and imprisonment hints at a key component of mobility equity that is not self-evident: it cannot merely be about having the opportunity to move, but must include the freedom to choose whether or not to move (Sager, 2006, p. 465). People should not be forced to move elsewhere, just as the absence of mobility opportunities should not confine people locally.

Overall, many circumstances predetermine people’s capacity to access human and social mobility, and thus limit their agency and restrict their freedom from constraints. It follows that inclusiveness

of mobility regimes is central to equal opportunity: gender, class, caste, ethnic background, disability and stigmatization of identity have huge implications for people's capacity to be mobile and access economic opportunities in ways that contribute to positive development outcomes. Reducing inequalities in this sense is then a question of countering exclusion while ensuring equal mobility opportunities among people within and between countries, alongside the creation of inclusive and just mobility regimes.

#### 4. Is human mobility an equalizing factor?

Writing on the plight of the Harraga community from North Africa, many of whom escaped poverty and marginalization towards the EU, Branko Milanovic asks a question that defines a seeming paradox of globalization (2012, p. 134): "Can a globalized world, where capital, goods, ideas, and information travel without impediment, coexist with a world where humans cannot move? Can these two separate and unequal worlds coexist when income differences between countries are huge and getting even larger?" The seeming paradox is that mobility and inequality grow in parallel. However, the idea of two "separate" worlds implied by Milanovic distracts from the fact that mobility and inequality do not necessarily contradict but rather reinforce one another. The crucial question is then how mobility equity is distributed unequally among people, how it is regulated differentially, and with what effects on inequality within and among countries.

Migration symbolizes global inequality but simultaneously represents an important "livelihoods diversification strategy" for many of the world's poorest nations (Black, Natali, & Skinner, 2005). The problem is that the poorest often do not have the necessary mobility capabilities to "diversify" their livelihoods. Where migration reduces inequality, it tends to do so within predetermined boundaries of global structural inequality: Recent immigration statistics from the EU show that economic integration and equalization mainly happens among countries with a similar Human Development Index (HDI) rather than between the extremes of inequality (Agafitei & Ivan, 2016). While many from the world's poorest or conflict-ridden areas are pushed into illegal immigration, selective

immigration regimes facilitate the inclusion of those who are deemed productive. The restricted mobility of the rightless goes hand in hand with the accelerated mobility of the privileged.

In this sense, more international labour mobility does not necessarily lead to more equality globally, at least not for those who would need it most, who are often excluded from the empowering effects of such mobility. Without alternatives, though, many from the world's poorest nations must nevertheless try to move towards more productive places, often irregularly and at great risk. Some find themselves driven out by violent conflict and humanitarian crises. Others "imagine" a better place elsewhere move from the countryside into cities, or from one country to another (Salazar, 2011; Tuckett, 2016). Alongside forced displacement, inequalities between countries are considered to be the strongest pull factor driving international migration. The world's nation-states have per capita incomes that range from less than US\$250 per person per year to more than US\$50,000 (Kuptsch, 2015, p. 341). The question with regard to SDG10 is how such mobility, in turn, can contribute to reduced inequalities.

Almost thirty years ago, Michael Lipton argued that migration from rural areas into towns and cities was not only a consequence of deprivation and inequality: it actually *increased* inequality within and between villages further, rather than reducing it (Lipton, 1980). In this particular Indian context, migration into towns increased rural inequality *within* villages, because it allowed the better-off to advance, while weakening the poor whose leaders lost their popular base; and it worsened inequality *between* villages because only few villages reaped the benefits while others did not (Lipton, 1980, p. 4). Human mobility does not contribute to reduced inequality *per se*. It depends on a large number of factors: Who moves and who does not? How are movements and labour regulated? What flows back to home areas, and what is lost in terms of human and economic potential?

Most research in the field of development has tried to answer these questions for the world of international migration and the financial remittances it entails (Buckley & Hofmann, 2012; Clemens,

Özden, & Rapoport, 2015). Initially, emigration was widely seen as a sign of development failure, but as the 2003 World Bank *Global Development Finance Report* drew attention to the massive growth in remittances, migrants were increasingly seen as active contributors to the development of their home countries (Bakewell, 2008). This turned remittances into a new “development mantra” (De Haas, 2005). In economic terms of income distribution, the poverty-reducing effects of remittances are well-documented, but their effects on inequality are less clear. Analysis of income data in Mexico shows that remittances from migrants abroad can initially increase rural income inequalities, but that over longer time, more widespread access to migration has equalizing effects (Kóczán & Loyola, 2018; Taylor, Adams, Mora, & López-Feldman, 2005). Globally, answers are more difficult to pin down, but it would follow that among those who have access to them, remittances could help reduce income inequality between sending and receiving countries of migrants if they contribute to sustainable economic development back home.

Research on the migration-development nexus has recently broadened in ways that go far beyond the limited focus on remittances measured by household income, to include issues such as human capital investment, global diaspora networks, and temporary migration (Clemens et al., 2015). This has also made answering the question of how remittances contribute to (economic) development and inequality more complex, not least because inequality needs to be defined in broader terms than simply income distribution: it is multidimensional and includes socio-cultural dimensions, as well as inequalities in access to power, and gender dynamics (Black et al., 2005). This broad approach also underlines that sustainable development does not equal economic development but reaches far beyond it. An understanding of inequality in this sense is rooted in the human capabilities approach, where human capability depends on the set of valuable “functionings” or freedoms that a person has effective access to (Sen, 2000). This should include the need for equalities of access to mobility, or equity of mobility capability. The primacy of capability and access within this approach underlines that inequality of opportunity, rather than outcomes, is the more appropriate indicator of inequalities within a framework of sustainable development.

Unfortunately, conventional research on migrant remittances mostly focused on cash flow contributions to the living conditions of households in developing countries, alongside the inflow of foreign exchange on a national level. In this purely financial sense, remittances from migrants would be an ideal form of bottom-up development, and even an alternative to conventional development aid. Yet, people have very different mobility capabilities and remittances often put significant burden on senders and involve high transaction costs, and they affect different people differently (Hammond, 2011). Migration and remittances do not automatically generate development and economic growth in sending areas (De Haas, 2005). Thus, migration and remittances must be grounded in the distribution of opportunities: “migration is not an exogenous variable, but an integral part of wider social and development processes”, meaning that the impact of such migration on development can only be understood in this wider context (De Haas, 2010, p. 228).

Focusing on capabilities does not mean that the outcomes of mobility and their impact on inequality are irrelevant. The terms “brain drain”, “brain gain” and “brain circulation” reflect important elements of this wider impact. The net transfer of human resources to migrant receiving countries is called a skills or brain drain: in the Philippines, for example, which has experienced a brain drain since the early 1970s, emigration and circular labour migration removed some of the most productive age groups and professionals from the local labour market (Alburo & Abella, 2002). Brain drain also leads to low economic growth, fiscal loss, reduced wages for the unskilled, and increased wages for the skilled, thereby exacerbating inequality rather than alleviating it (Battistella & Sun Liao, 2013, p. 12). Moreover, skilled brain drain often goes hand in hand with “brain waste”, namely the employment of the most productive generations of migrant workers in low-paid and low-skilled jobs abroad.

However, migration can also lead to a “brain gain” through various return benefits, at least as long as emigration does not surpass certain levels of the overall productive population (Beine, Docquier, & Oden-Defoort, 2011). Exemplary cases that are studied for the impact of such brain gain are

Afghanistan, China, and the Philippines (Wescott & Brinkerhoff, 2006). In an ideal world, migrants would bring home accumulated knowledge, transfer expertise and skills, start businesses, or invest earnings into capacity back home. In a similar vein, temporary migrants may create benefits through “brain circulation” even if they do not return permanently. Ideally, this contributes to an eventual return flow of expertise, knowledge, skills and manpower (Battistella & Sun Liao, 2013, p. 16). How “drain” can be turned into “gain” is thus a key question that depends on a large number of factors, including the extent of freedom accorded by a mobility regime and policies that offer a gateway to transform migration-related income into sustainable capacity back home. Yet, multiple stages of circulation can change the effects of migration on the home country and vice-versa, to the point that emigrating is no longer about helping the group or family at home, “but a way of escaping its constraints” by building a new life elsewhere (Sayad, 2004, p. 39).

Another limitations lies in restrictive regimes: circular labour migration can form an “invisible cage” that stabilises categorical inequality instead of reducing it. In the case of hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers in Lebanon, a mix of coercion and consent has long kept labour rotating in restrictive ways (Chalcraft, 2009). As discussions about brain gain and brain circulation are very outcome oriented, they become conceptually blind to the many ways in which human mobility and circular migration are tied up with structural inequality and politically motivated exclusion (Coutin, 2007; Hackl et al., 2016). In short, outcome-oriented explanations of how migration impacts development must pay more attention to how mobility capabilities are distributed, and how migration is regulated differentially within and among groups.

One example is a context I have conducted qualitative field research in: Palestinian labour inclusion in the Israeli economy. Israel’s occupation of the West Bank imposes a regime through movement restrictions, legal differentiation and limitations of Palestinian land use and business activity (Kelly, 2006; The World Bank, 2014). Yet, more than 120,000 Palestinians from the West Bank work in Israel every workday, among them tens of thousands without official permits and social security; while

regular workers lose around a third of their monthly wage to labour brokers (ILO, 2017b). As workers are incorporated into Israeli construction and low-wage service jobs, they earn twice as much as they would back home, but they simultaneously become dependent and are unable to transfer skills and social mobility back home. Money may help Palestinians escape the poverty trap but only at the terrible cost of failing to build and sustain their own local economies (Hackl, 2017). Such an unequal regime of labour inclusion effectively contributes to “de-development”, namely the maintaining of a structural relationship between a dominant and a subordinate economy which distorts the weaker economy’s development and effectively undermines it (Roy, 2014). It cements structural inequality instead of reducing it.

The question of whether mobility is an equalizing factor in society eventually comes down to a combination of individual capacity to become mobile in empowering ways, and the various legal, economic and political regimes that govern, restrict and regulate mobility. Equal access to channels of labour migration, commuting, and social mobility requires inclusive policies that can equalize both opportunities and outcomes. To come back to Lipton’s original study about rural-urban migration: if always the same villages or groups of people benefit from mobility, while others remain left out, inequalities are likely to rise rather than decrease; and if labour migrants are exploited and unable to build an independent economy back home, their mobility maintains global gaps of inequality instead of eroding them. The main challenge is how policies can work to distribute mobility opportunities more equally, while ensuring circular migration has an exit option that benefits development in migrants’ home countries too. Mobility equity can thus be considered a precondition for equity of opportunity in a globalized and interconnected world, including the freedom to move (and not to move). Building inclusive bottom-up pathways into social mobility forms a central part of such equity.

## 5. Inequality and social mobility

Social mobility and human mobility often appear separate although they are inherently connected. Social mobility is an important indicator of opportunity because it describes upward movement in social and economic “classes” within or across generations. On the one hand, people’s capacity to move to more productive places can be essential for their upward mobility in the home or the host society. On the other hand, badly governed urbanisation and migration can prevent social mobility and positive development effects, as the world’s growing urban slums indicate. Here it is important to specify where social mobility takes place, either in the place of origin, or in the place of destination. The positive development effects of migration on the home country, for example, are often explained with the impact of remittances on upward mobility. The pathway to social mobility in the host country is often treated under the framework of integration.

Wherever the gains take place, social mobility has commonly been associated with access and accumulation of various types of capital, such as *human capital*: the skills and capacities that allow a person to carry out tasks in industrial economies (Becker, 1964). Bourdieu suggested that mobility can produce other aspects of symbolic or cultural capital too, such as prestige, language skills or external recognition of one’s value in society (Bourdieu, 1986). The general link between geographical and social mobility featured prominently in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, where scholars investigated urbanization and its effects. Members of the so-called Chicago School identified a sense of heightened mobility in the city, which eased movement between groups and social contexts but also created a sense of insecurity and instability (Wirth, 1938). The American city eventually became a global symbol for individual social mobility among aspiring immigrants and new arrivals.

This particular history hints at a conceptual problem with social mobility in relation to inequality: that its relationship is valued differently between cultural and political contexts. While individual upward mobility lies at the heart of US-American culture and conceptions of liberty, political systems

influenced by European welfare states tend to define social mobility at least partly in collective terms of just and equal “downward” distribution. This may be one reason why inequalities have been decreasing in Europe, while they increased in the United States (Alvaredo et al., 2018). Policy-oriented discussions about social mobility have usually focused on these and other high-income countries rather than the developing world (OECD, 2017). In many of the richer parts of the world, the incentive to leave unproductive places for more productive ones has actually diminished (The Economist, 2017). Going elsewhere is no longer considered to be the sole gateway to social mobility, even if opportunities are not locally available.

The relationship between social mobility and inequality is surprisingly difficult to pin down. As year-long panels with individuals in Argentina showed, a rise in income inequality implies little about the “movement” of specific individuals within that distribution; as inequality rises, the initially low earners do at least well, and often very much better in terms of gains, than the already higher earners: it was often the lowest initial earners who experienced the largest earnings gains when relative inequality grew (Fields & Sánchez Puerta, 2010). This means that a rise in inequality does not always mean that only the rich get richer, as other parts of society can experience upward mobility too. A focus on relative earnings offers little certainty about how social mobility and inequality determine one another. A framework of mobility equity offers a more promising approach because it takes the question of people’s access to (social) mobility channels as the starting point of combating inequalities.

Social mobility is an important policy area for equalizing access to resources and various forms of capital in society, from which marginalized groups are frequently excluded. Rigidly stratified societies, such as the Indian caste system, and categorically excluded groups such as refugees or irregular migrants, face categorical limits to social mobility as a driver of sustainable development. Like human mobility, social mobility is often a question of rights, race and politics. Research on South Africa, for example, shows that “inherited circumstances” and race predetermine and severely

limit intergenerational earning mobility (Piraino, 2015). Research on other low-status minorities with a history of severe exploitation, such as India's Dalits, Japan's Burakumin, or Cuban and US Blacks, shows how people "inherit" disadvantages that reinforce poverty (Meerman, 2001).

Despite the "leave no one behind" mantra, SDG 10 does not include indicators that can capture progress for marginalised groups, such as those defined by race and ethnicity. The SDGs thus risk "ignoring, neglecting and excluding marginalised communities" (Winkler & Satterthwaite, 2017, p. 1092). This critique sprung from a perspective grounded in human rights, suggesting that language, religion, indigenous status, caste and other stratifiers marginalise groups and result in an unequal distribution of opportunities even if economies experience growth. One is thus urged to acknowledge the "existence, magnitude and interplay of multiple forms of inequalities" (Ibid, 1074). Within this context, social mobility is highly relational and contextual: its meanings and forms are culturally embedded and directly related to social hierarchies and various forms of injustice in society.

David Mosse (2010) shows well how caste society in India means that poverty and inequality are an effect of social categorisation and identity among adivasis ('tribals') and dalits ('untouchables'), who live as subordinates in Indian society. Where subordination and poverty are "durable", reducing inequality only works within the boundaries of restrictions imposed by the social and cultural order that make social mobility impossible for some. Nevertheless, conventional models often link "growth and social integration" to suggest that urbanization and expanding middle-class opportunities lead to increased equality (Meerman, 2001, p. 1460). This may work for some minorities but not for those whose exclusion is only replicated within neoliberal politics of urban inclusion, such as the Ethiopian urban poor (Di Nunzio, 2017). It is thus vital for social and human mobility policies to address the issues faced by particular marginalized groups, rather than presuming generalized policies and economic growth will equalize conditions. Poverty is relational if "people are poor because of others" who have control over them (Wood, 2003). This makes the task of distributing mobility

opportunities more equally a contentious issue that challenges established power structures. It follows that development interventions and policies that seek to increase mobility equity and social mobility cannot succeed independent from larger questions of societal justice, including struggles for minority rights and historical reconciliation, and the fight against racism.

Not only do different people have different mobility capacities to overcome inequalities; some people cannot effectively act for themselves even if supported externally to do so. This includes the elderly, people with disability, and to “outgroups of various kinds whose exclusion reduces their capacity for social action: migrants; ethnic minorities; minority religious sects within dominant cultures” (Wood, 2003, p. 456). Moreover, the social mechanisms that create “durable inequality” often persist because parties on both sides of the categorical divide come to depend on it (Tilly, 1998). This precludes social upward mobility. Categorical distinctions between people and the subordination of groups in neoliberal economies sometimes reproduce inequality rather than overcoming it: the processes that allow some to escape from poverty – such as economic inclusion – can be the same that allow the exploitation of others (see Mosse, 2010).

Indeed, powerful laws, political agendas and economic interests protect global inequality and limit the social mobility of some, for the benefit of the privileged and powerful. For example, immigration law enforcement has rendered ever greater numbers and ever more diverse categories of migrants subject to arrest, detention, and deportation (Peutz & De Genova, 2010; Talavera, Núñez-Mchiri, & Heyman, 2010). Illegality precludes the realization of social mobility through human mobility.

Although forcibly displaced persons tend to be overlooked by debates around social mobility and inequality, they clearly matter: 65.3 million people were displaced globally at the time of writing, or one person in every 113. To overcome their economically immobile positions, as Paul Collier and Alexander Betts argue, refugees must become autonomous economic agents; not part of a humanitarian problem but one of development: it is “about restoring people’s autonomy through

jobs and education” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. 10). Projects they consulted, such as the Jordan Compact, hoped to create jobs for tens of thousands of unemployed Syrian refugees.

Between Syrian refugees and Indian dalits, redistributing opportunities requires equal access to social mobility and the inclusion of all. The problem for development policy is that inequality is systematically built into some of the worlds’ societies and economies, which is why reducing inequalities through social mobility often ends up questioning systemic problems that cannot easily be fixed. If addressing the caste system or refugees’ legal exclusion as a main driver of inequality is considered a political taboo, then reducing inequalities will only be possible within predetermined policy limits. There is thus a need to integrate human rights into an inclusive framework of mobility equity. Otherwise, the SDGs risk overlooking important pillars of equality (Winkler & Williams, 2017).

Beyond the predicament of categorically excluded groups, social mobility remains an important policy arena with regard to human mobility because it represents a continuing pathway towards inclusion and integration for legal migrants. If human mobility is what moves people elsewhere, social mobility is often what is needed to unlock people’s productive potential in the host society and the potential benefits for the home country. The doors must be opened at both ends of a bridge, once people have crossed it.

What is true for society more generally is especially true for work-seeking migrants: equality is not a natural outcome of economic forces. “Equity, rather, is created by society, by the institutions – the laws, policies and practices – that govern the society, its economy and, in particular, its labour market” (Berg, 2015, p. 1). Institutions are essential for distributing social mobility opportunities equally. This is especially true for labour market institutions, which have an important effect on migrants’ working conditions and their inequality vis-à-vis non-migrant workers (Kuptsch, 2015, p. 340). Labour market institutions are crucial for upward economic mobility and decent working conditions among national and international migrants. Christiane Kuptsch (2015) at the ILO sees four

main areas of intervention for labour market institutions in this respect: collective bargaining, minimum wages, social security, and employment protection laws.

While irregular migrants are often excluded from these benefits, “legal” migrants tend to have little bargaining power despite the legality of their condition. This limits their social mobility and can lock them into exploitative and immobile positions. For example, in the Gulf States powerful brokerage systems restrict workers’ rights and pressure them into compliance (Hertog, 2010; Khalaf, AlShehabi, & Hanieh, 2014). In an effort to combat such disempowering regimes, international collaboration has recently allowed improved rights and bargaining power in some cases of migrant labour. One example is the cross-border cooperation among trade unions through the Union Network International (UNI) Passport, which allows a unionized migrant to be ‘hosted’ by an UNI-affiliated union in the destination country (Kuptsch, 2015, p. 347). The passport offers a number of important benefits that would otherwise remain inaccessible to the migrants, such as information on working conditions and tax regulations, training courses, and legal support. In Europe and elsewhere, including collaboration between India and Nepal or in the Caribbean, trade unions have become an important player in the defence and protection of migrant workers (Kuptsch, 2015; Schmidt, 2006).

Such protection is essential to unlock the development potential of migrants and pave the way towards upward mobility, and by extension, to reduce durable inequalities between migrant and non-migrant populations. This is true between individual migrants and the citizens of the host society, and where remittances and other backflows matter, between their countries of origin and the host country – mobility thus integrates questions of inequality within and between countries.

Focusing on mobility equity on both ends of people’s journeys ultimately requires approaches that connect policies that increase social mobility in the host country or city with those that address the role of remittances for the sustainable development of home countries or regions.

Ultimately, building just and equal societies requires institutions that can protect the quality of jobs with decent wages and working conditions, as well as enacting policies to support those who cannot

work or are unable to find work. The need for transnational regulation and stronger institutions is especially urgent in the rapidly growing world of digital economies within which digital labour has acquired its own hypermobility.

## 6. Digital mobility and inequality

The rise of a global digital labour market offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between inequality and mobility, as people can stay put while the product of their work moves. What does it mean for the fight to reduce inequalities within and between countries, if the mobility of labour outruns the mobility of workers? How can policies and institutions contribute to the positive effects these new mobilities have on sustainable development?

On the upside, digital economies may create new opportunities for workers in remote or marginalized areas of the world. Yet, a growing body of research suggests that the benefits of digital technology for development are accompanied by serious and far-reaching risks (Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017; Huws, 2014; Malik, Nicholson, & Heeks, 2017). It is estimated that the gap between highly-skilled and low-skilled jobs is likely to rise, with many low-paid jobs becoming repetitive digital tasks termed 'microwork'. Throughout history, technological changes that drove economic growth and development also destroyed jobs alongside those it created (ILO, 2017a, p. 1). Automation and disruptive digital economies may deconstruct entire sectors of the world's labour markets and could lead to mass unemployment in the process (Frey & Osborne, 2013). The growing role of Big Data, the penetration of the Internet, Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet-of-Things, and online work platforms are combined developments that are expected to contribute to greater job insecurity, growing inequality, and mass technological unemployment in the future (OECD, 2016). An ILO study for ASEAN countries estimated that about three in five jobs in this region face "a high risk of automation" (Chang, Rynhart, & Huynh, 2016). Other traditional professions are gradually replaced by dynamic digital labour in the online gig economy, from deliveries to taxi drivers. At the same time, the digital mobility of labour has created a wide range of new job

opportunities outside of OECD countries. A major question is then what impact the growing mobility of work will have on the lives of workers in low and middle-income countries? Some may longer need to move elsewhere in order to harvest the benefits of transnational mobility, such as international employment opportunities. Others see digital skills acquired through online work, such as programming, as a stepping stone towards future migration: digital labour mobility does not necessarily replace human mobility, but may lead into it.

Globally, some digital transformations appear to deepen structures of inequality despite offering economic opportunities in developing countries. An emerging planetary labour market comes at a time when the majority of the world's people are connected to internet for the first time in human history by 2018. The so-called 'gig economy' already comprises some 50 million people registered with online digital work platforms in a market of \$4-5 billion in transactions (Graham & Anwar, 2018; Heeks, 2017). Some 67% aged 15-24 in developing countries use the Internet and young people are at the forefront of internet adoption everywhere (ITU, 2017). Increasing connectivity for those who live outside the world's economic cores coincides with a labour market in which millions of jobs can be done from almost anywhere on Earth: "a mass migration of labour, but not of people" (Graham, 2018).

This growing mobility of labour has potentially far-reaching effects on workers' bargaining power. In a market where work is so mobile that human migration appears increasingly ineffective, a Kenyan writing text for search engines, or a Vietnamese data entry worker, are in direct competition with workers from everywhere else in the world. Amid this over-supply of labour, platforms like Upwork.com or Freelancer.com trade labour at the level of the micro-tasks delivered by tens of millions of individual workers. As these jobs are extremely temporary, changeable and potentially exploitative, economic geography matters more and matters less at the same time: work travels easily, but within a digital economy that builds on underlying global inequalities (Graham, Hjorth, &

Lehdonvirta, 2017). Technology, mobility and inequality become linked in new ways that need to be understood better.

A combination of factors has made many believe that internet-based marketplaces might permit a “virtual migration” offering economic benefits akin to physical migration, by lifting people out of poverty, raising labour force participation, and improving productivity (Graham, Lehdonvirta, Wood, Barnard, & Hjorth, 2018). Policy-makers, governments and organisations increasingly see digital labour as an economic development strategy to bring jobs to places that need them.

These new digital mobilities affect inequality of opportunity through the forms of inclusion and exclusion they produce. Take an artificial intelligence training centre in rural Central Africa, where workers are helping to build some of the world’s most advanced technologies and services: they sit in open-plan offices with hundreds of desks and computers and do highly repetitive work like matching names to photographs of celebrities; tasks AI cannot yet perfectly perform (Graham, 2018). In doing so, these platforms theoretically allow workers in developing countries to access distant labour markets and overcome local constraints, be it discrimination or the absence of a legal rights to work. Such digitally outsourced labour could provide reasonable earnings, career development opportunities and flexibility for workers in developing countries (Heeks, 2017).

Indeed, digital workers in low-income countries, such as Kenya, Mauritius, Lesotho and Cameroon, framed digital work as their only option for securing work; “unable to take up employment in local labour markets” (Graham et al., 2018, p. 147). Digital labour platforms offer some economic inclusion for individuals who are not qualified enough to secure traditional employment in their local labour markets. This includes individuals who are made redundant at older age, or those who live at home and have caring obligations via their family. Potentially, then, this new planetary mobility of labour has huge potential in lifting those up who would otherwise remain unemployed or underpaid. This may decrease inequalities within and among countries.

Conceptually, this links into an understanding of mobility equity inclusive of people's freedom to choose whether or not to move. Alongside those who are denied access, people have various reasons for not moving elsewhere. Theoretically, at least, the growing digital mobility of work could offer new opportunities that underpin this freedom: building up skills and networks in digital economies can potentially enable both, staying home or using it as a foundation for future skilled emigration. However, the risk is that such globally outsourced labour merely utilizes and maintains global inequalities for the profit of companies that are mostly located in the Global North.

Online "gig work" suffers from oversupply of labour, isolation of individuals, overwork, opacity in the sense that many workers have no idea who their employer is, and lastly, intermediation: as many unequal labour markets with little regulation, work can end up flowing to intermediaries who re-outsource the work and keep part of the client's fee (Graham et al., 2018, p. 10). Such online gig work also includes explicit conventional discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic identity or origin, with one platform worker living in the Nairobi slums saying "you have to create an identity that is not you" (Graham et al., 2017b, p. 148). Digital labour platforms allow many people who are disadvantaged in their local labour markets to find work and earn money. But many have little choice but to accept unfavourable conditions. It is important to put these digital economies and the new mobility of labour at the heart of an approach to reduce inequalities through ensuring equal opportunity and mobility equity. This also requires some form of protection from the unregulated global hypermobility of labour, and states, despite their complicity, have an important role to play in a more just regulation (Huws, 2014).

Digital technology and the mobility of digital labour have also had a significant impact on the outsourced manufacturing sector in developing countries. Automation is likely to play a large role in large-scale demand production by reducing the need for labour per produced unit (UNCTAD, 2017, p. 17). Will the New Digital Economy open up new opportunities for developing countries, or deepen existing geographic divides? According to UNCTAD, there are three potential scenarios: the first is

that routine jobs in manufacturing or software coding could be “re-shored or even eliminated”, which would disrupt entire economies in developing countries; a second scenario would allow developing country firms to move-up the value chain and produce their own competitive goods thanks to the availability of new technology; the third scenario would mean that the current differentiation between “innovate here/produce there” remains largely the same (UNCTAD, 2017). There are no clear answers to these questions at the time of writing, calling for new empirical research over to offer some concrete insights.

The digital restructuring of the economy could offer opportunities for populations that are categorically excluded from local labour markets, but should it be seen as an economic opportunity for refugees and temporary migrants? New forms of “digitally mediated labour” (Irani, 2015) could indeed contribute to the provision of *decent* work among refugees and decrease the inequality between them and their host populations, while also generating potential long-term benefits such as skill transfer for their possible future return to the home country. Here, the growing forced mobility of humans into places of relative confinement coincides with the growing mobility of labour. Especially youths are likely to adopt digital work and make up the majority of the worlds’ refugee population (Desilver, 2015).

So far there is little research evidence about how digital labour relates to displaced persons, beyond the general relationship between ICTs and refugees (Wilding & Gifford, 2013). Research in this area should be a key priority, given the scale of displacement and its long-term negative impact on development outcomes around the world (Betts, Bloom, Kaplan, & Omata, 2016). Meanwhile, “digital livelihoods” are already becoming a new development mantra: According to one initiative at the World Food Programme (WFP) in Lebanon, refugees should tap into digital economies by becoming data cleaners and crowd workers, thereby building a brighter future from cash for food to tech for food. All this moves digital work – as a possible pathway to economic autonomy – into the centre of how categorically excluded populations may be offered a pathway towards social mobility.

The global digital economy could contribute to decreased inequalities within and between countries and regions. Equally so, it could create a mass of exploited vulnerable workers outside of just labour regimes that can ensure decent working conditions. Whether it is the mobility of workers, as among migrants, or the mobility of labour, as in digital economies: the boundary-crossing and global nature of mobility demands effective regulation and policies that focus on mobility equity within and among countries. As digital labour underlines, such mobility equity must include the freedom to choose whether or not to move.

The growth of digital economies also raises pressing questions about sustainability. Viewed within the SDGs more generally, technology will play a key role in reducing carbon emissions. However, in the case of digital economies, this line of thought has a major limitation: overarching digitisation poses significant long-term threats to sustainability. Digital ecosystems such as those in 'smart-cities' create forms of wired complexity that is likely to increase consumption and energy use significantly (Colding, Colding, & Barthel, 2018). Data centres, with their cooling systems, already consume large amounts of energy and generated more than 2% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2017 (Avgerinou, Bertoldi, & Castellazzi, 2017). A framework of mobility equity within the global sustainable development agenda cannot ignore the connectivity between SDG 10 and other goals, particularly with regard to the tension between economic growth, digital technology and ecology.

## 7. Implications for policy-making in global sustainable development

As it demands more equal access to mobility opportunities, alongside the just regulation of mobility regimes across scales, *mobility equity* reflects the fact that global interdependencies and complexities are gradually increasing (Kanie et al., 2017, p. 14). Evidently, new ideas that inspire research and policy must take these global interdependencies and their relation to local contexts into account. As the trajectories of commuters, migrants and digital labour connect regions, countries and continents with one another, they demand meaningful policy synergies across borders and scales. They must connect overarching global regimes with the different local mobility

capabilities on the individual and group level. Focusing on income inequality of outcomes will say too little about those left behind, be it lower castes, social classes, or those categorically excluded from labour markets. Moreover, new forms of digital mobility coexist with human mobility but the two realms have largely been viewed as separate entities. In fact, digital labour and migration are jointly implicated in the struggle to reduce inequalities within and between countries.

Badly managed mobility regimes and indecent working conditions continue to undermine the positive impact that labour migration and digital work may otherwise have on reducing inequalities sustainably. Remittances contribute to reduced inequalities globally, but only few can become well-earning migrants in the first place, and so inequality within sending-countries could increase as a result of labour migration. This is why mobility equity ultimately requires both, equal access to empowering mobility and equality of outcomes from such mobility. To achieve this end, strong institutions and just redistributive policies are needed within and among countries.

The task of framing concrete policies that reduce inequality through mobility equity faces the challenge of delimiting a potentially limitless policy field. This means that although an individual or group, such as workers of a given profession in high global demand, are tangible targets for proactive policy in a region or state, their mobility across borders and contexts demand transnational approaches that still remain embedded in the specific context their individual journey departs from. If freelancers in rural central African towns are connected to a global digital labour market that defies conventional regulation, how are equal opportunities and decent work to be safeguarded amid such hypermobility of labour? If labour migrants are imprisoned by exploitative regimes in receiving states, how can the remittances produced in a context of oppression be transformed into sustainable development?

A framework of mobility equity means that local policies aimed at reducing inequality must take the effects of global and distant developments into account. "Distant" suggests that the effects felt locally are often rooted in policies elsewhere. Yet exactly this is also the opportunity for a mobility-

centred approach within the SDGs: mobility connects otherwise disconnected layers of inequality across scales. Such interconnectedness means that proactive national and transnational policies can potentially reshape the global dimension of inequality through a focus on mobility, if they are designed and coordinated well. Realising mobility equity needs global, regional and national norms that offer benchmarks for achieving just mobility regimes and equal mobility capabilities. The SDGs are one such norm in a broad sense, because they offer a starting point for more concrete approaches and critical perspectives to emerge.

The SDGs global goal-setting creates opportunities to orient research and policies into a unified direction, whereby the one informs the other. Such “peer focus” can establish common ‘metrics’ and frameworks alongside the mutual learning of research and policies between scales (“peer review”); moreover, the SDGs can provide a form of “peer pressure”, one of three levers that may turn the global inequality debate into national action (Chancel et al., 2017). On the other hand, the broad sustainable development agenda will require intensive consultation not only with governments, but with marginalized minorities, civil society organizations, and labour market institutions in order to work towards mobility equity.

The International Organization for Migration put forward one important approach that aims to connect policies across national and international levels with the help of norms. IOM designed a Migration Governance Index (MGI) that was taken up as part of a list of SDG indicators (UNSDSN, 2015). The MGI builds on the premise that well-governed migration brings profound benefits to receiving and sending countries, while poorly managed migration causes harm and represents missed development opportunities. IOM evaluated the performance of 15 states based on five domains of “effective” migration governance: institutional capacity, migrant rights, safe and orderly migration, labour migration management, and regional and international co-operation and partnerships (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016, p. 15). IOM hopes to provide a “consolidated

framework” for evaluating country-specific migration governance as a way to inspire the implementation of migration-related SDGs.

As a global policy lubricant, mobility connects different scales and levels of policy-making on inequalities; it represents an opportunity for transnational peer focus. One reason why mobility equity is a useful approach is this interconnection, which is a quality that is also associated with SDG 10 more generally: inequality is highly connected to the targets of other SDGs, be it “gender inequality”, “decent work and economic growth”, or “no poverty”. Now, it is interesting to see that those countries with the best performing MGI featured strong policy “connectivity” across different national policy areas, such as migration and labour market, backed up by strong institutions: in short, they can be said to have interconnected mobility regimes in place. “‘connectivity’ means that migration-related policy is not pursued in isolation; instead, it is pursued holistically, in tandem with many other policy domains” (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016, p. 8). In this sense, migrant-sending countries could run diaspora outreach programmes to ensure migration and remittances support wider development objectives. Trade unions cooperation across border to help migrants could do the same with digital workers, who are often vulnerable to exploitation as employees of intangible transnational platforms. Alongside transparency, such cross-country coordination is considered essential, and can include regional consultative processes, unilateral agreements and international conventions.

Yet, reducing inequalities globally will only be effective if the SDGs are combined with a rethinking of international trade agreements, which directly concern deeply entrenched inequalities of power in international relations; an appropriate governance responses must integrate the SDGs into institutions and practices, on regional, national, and local levels (Bernstein, 2017). The main challenge is then to integrate mobility and inequality in ways that no longer view national and international inequality as separate, but rather as interdependent. Reducing inequalities globally will only be effective if the SDGs are combined with a rethinking of international trade agreements,

which directly concern deeply entrenched inequalities of power in international relations. This demands appropriate governance responses that integrate the SDGs into institutions and practices, on regional, national, and local levels (Bernstein, 2017).

The problem with the MGI and related initiatives is that they are not oriented towards mobility equity and the inclusion of all. For example, IOM suggests that receiving countries could guide their migration frameworks towards “skill lists”, which would mean that migration routes are only accessible to the highly skilled. Neither does this reflect the “leave no one behind” mantra of the SDGs, nor would it contribute to reduced inequalities within sending countries. Moreover, it fails to underpin people’s freedom to choose whether or not to move.

However, the MGI does connect directly to target 10.7, which seeks to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. It has two indicators: recruitment cost borne by employee as a proportion of yearly income earned in country of destination; and the number of countries that have implemented well-managed migration policies. The first indicator could contribute to increased development-benefits of labour migration if intermediary and brokerage costs are reduced.

It is clear that conventional indicators have a difficult time measuring equality of opportunity, rather than outcomes, and adding questions about access to mobility into the mix does not make it an easier task. In short, finding ways to measure progress in mobility equity remains a challenge. SDG 10 has relevant targets with regard to mobility equity, but the associated indicators reduce these targets to statistical numerical outcomes: target 10.2, to empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, reflects the need for equal access to mobility opportunities; but the “proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income, by sex, age and persons with disabilities”, leaves too many marginalized groups behind. Target 10.3 is equally relevant and does better in reflecting inequality of opportunity: it seeks to eliminate discriminatory laws, policies

and practices while promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action. The indicator refers to the proportion of population that reports discrimination or harassment in the previous 12 months, which raises concerns about who is able and willing to come forward with such complaints.

Coordinated nondiscrimination policies are one way by which equal access to empowering mobility can be safeguarded, once fairly managed mobility regimes are in place. With regard to migration, success in reducing inequalities will likely require a combination of narrow metrics and broad policy initiatives that direct action towards ensuring mobility equity from the ground up. This includes the establishment of strong institutions and just regimes, which are no less important in digital economies.

### *7.1. The SDGs and digital mobility equity*

Although the SDGs aim to promote decent work alongside sustainable growth, the particular challenges of automation and digital economies are inadequately addressed. Gig workers may be subsumed under “precarious employment”, as stated in target 8 of SDG 8, which protects labour rights. But how policies could improve digital mobility equity in particular, and in alignment with the SDGs, has yet to be defined. Some interventions in the field of digital economies and new digital mobilities will be closely related to labour migration, but the mobility of work poses different challenges than the mobility of workers.

Online work platforms operate globally and avoid adhering to the labour laws of the country the company and the worker are located in. The monopoly many of these companies build due to “positive network effects”, whereby workers build up positive reviews over time, can lock them into single platforms (Graham et al., 2018, p. 11). The promotion of decent work for all must facilitate improved working conditions among gig workers, and thereby reduce the massive inequalities that underpin the success of this planetary digital economy. The global nature of this interconnected digital economy, which unites workers from developing and developed countries within a single

market, offers particular opportunities for the SDGs, which are designed to be applied globally and not only in the developing world.

Within the framework of mobility equity, the digital mobility of work is then not so different from the movement of workers: differently situated people need equal access to both mobility opportunities, which would increase their freedom to choose whether or not to move geographically. Moreover, both forms of mobility involve the exploitation of regulatory 'blind spots' in a complex international system. For migrants, this includes labour brokerage and the costs of remittances; for those working for online work platforms, it includes similar intermediaries, alongside the absence of formal contracts, health insurance and other basic labour rights. Firms that outsource labour online usually do not offer social protection, freedom of association; discrimination and a lack of adequate earnings, working hours and health and safety standards are widespread (Heeks, 2017, p. 12). These are clear issues to be tackled by interventions, but the globalised nature of such work and its organisation means that conceivable interventions simultaneously impact workers in the global North as well as the global South. Moreover, interventions must work with the "deeper picture" of digital gig economy work to regulate how outsourcing is designed and how it impacts workers (Heeks, 2017, p. 17; Malik et al., 2017). A key challenge would be to develop ideas about how digital mobility can be regulated in coordination with interventions in labour migration, rather than as separate policy domains.

Other SDG-related problems governments, international organizations and labour market institutions need to address through regulation and adequate policies are bargaining power and unionisation, which demand creative solutions in an entirely global labour market. Moreover, gig workers, like labour migrants and commuters, always live somewhere even if that place is different from the place of work. All digital platforms, clients, and workers are anchored in specific places that can become starting points for solutions. Indeed, "we need to consider and address all of these issues if online gig work is to truly live up to its potential for human development and become a

sustainable situation for many more workers into the future” (Graham et al., 2018, p. 11). To remain relevant in the future, the implementation of the SDGs has a responsibility to take these particular challenges serious. In addition to developing a global strategy for Youth Employment by 2020, as outlined in target 8b of SDG 8, a similar concerted framework could work towards mobility equity and decent work in the digital economy.

All this matters with regard to mobility equity because digital mobilities may gradually replace human mobility in some areas, if the mobility of labour outruns the mobility of workers. The romanticized “digital nomad” whose work travels globally, while sitting in cafés or libraries of the Global North, suggests a sense of freedom. Yet, exploitative working conditions, monopolies and a lack of alternatives quickly turn this “nomad” into a prisoner of the conditions imposed by the digital economy. In order to develop mobility equity in the digital gig economy, more evidence is needed about how different stakeholders, such as platforms, can work together with governments and multinational bodies to create meaningful policies and dialogue. The role of long-term research is important to underpin this process, for example on the distribution of value and welfare effects of the digital gig economy (Agrawal, Horton, Lecetara, & Lyons, 2013). A framework of mobility equity seeks to link policies and research on digital labour with research on migration and studies of other forms of social and human mobility.

## 8. Mobility equity as a stepping stone to sustainable development

The mobility-inequality nexus opens up countless associated issues, many of which could not be addressed here, among them the distribution of transport and infrastructure, health inequalities, disability, and their impact on mobility, borders, citizenship, conflict, and more. The hope is that this sharply condensed review of important contributions to our understanding of the mobility-inequality relationship can nevertheless lead to associated debates, policy-initiatives and new research in diverse fields. Proposing a concrete framework of mobility equity requires a difficult balance between coherence and focus, comprehensiveness and partiality. Broad frameworks often flatten

individual differences, which is why an equity-based approach to reducing inequalities must necessarily be grounded in the diversity of mobility and its experience around the globe.

As part of a series of special issues on SDGs, this article provides one puzzle piece in a continuously expanding picture; it offers one possible focal point for future policy-making and research in the global development agenda. Mobility equity, I argue, is ultimately a precondition for reduced inequalities within and between countries. It does not simply call for more movement or more mobility, but for a more equal and just distribution of the access to human, social and digital mobility. Such mobility equity then has two main pillars: equal opportunities and access to empowering forms of social and human mobility, including the freedom to choose whether or not to move; and inclusive and just mobility regimes with policies that connect different scales and levels, without undermining people's agency and control. In short, mobility equity is about people's equal capacity and freedom to be mobile and about the just and inclusive regulation of mobility in all its forms, including human, social and digital mobility.

In association with a framework of mobility equity within the wider sustainable development agenda, three directions for future research are proposed with the particular attention to the implementation of SDG 10. Broadly speaking, more empirical research is needed about how social, human and digital mobility are linked to inequality both within *and* between countries and beyond economic metrics and income surveys, with a focus on opportunities rather than outcomes.

Moreover, a key challenge remains that people's capacity to access empowering mobility is unequally distributed. Research that shows how categorically excluded minorities can improve their capacity to access human, social and digital mobility in ways that benefit sustainable development would support policies that seek to meet this challenge. Finally, research evidence is needed about how mobility-related policies can tackle inequality across regional, national and global scales, and how different actors can cooperate to implement such policies across sectors and borders. Little is known, for example, about successful policy interventions that improved the positive development-

impact of digital labour against the backdrop of the SDGs. The proposed framework of mobility equity, so it is hoped, will become a stepping stone for future research explores the relationship between inequality and mobility for the benefit of global sustainable development.

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### **Highlights**

- 1) Well-managed human and social mobility can contribute to reduced inequalities within and among countries.
- 2) Mobility equity is a precondition for reduced inequalities within the sustainable development agenda.
- 3) Mobility equity includes the freedom to be mobile in empowering ways, and the just regulation of mobility regimes.
- 4) More research is needed about how social, human and digital mobility are mutually implicated and linked to inequality.
- 5) Mobility equity must become a core component of policies that tackle inequalities within and among countries.

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<sup>i</sup> The Gini coefficient is a prominent measure of income inequality that varies between 1 (indicating perfect equality) and 0 (indicating perfect inequality); the Palma index is another measure of income inequality, reflecting the ratio of the share of national income received by the richest 10 percent of the population to the share received by the poorest 40 percent of the population.