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Why economic migrants are heroes

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Why economic migrants are heroes.

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French President Emmanuel Macron likes heroes. Mamadou Gassama [saved a child's life](#) by scaling four floors bare-handed. The president rewarded him by legalising his stay in France, inviting him to apply for naturalisation and offering him a role in a fire brigade.

That decision provoked unexpected reactions. The far right welcomed it, so as to emphasise that French nationality should be deserved, and that Gassama was deserving “unlike others”. On the left, some philosophers fear that heroism will become a condition for legalising migrants' status.



Gilbert Collard ✓
@GilbertCollard · [Follow](#)

La nationalité française devrait s'hériter ou se mériter : contrairement à d'autres, [#MamoudouGassama](#) la mérite.

10:49 AM · May 28, 2018

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Raphaël Enthoven ✓
@Enthoven_R · [Follow](#)

Ce n'est pas parce qu'il a sauvé une vie que Mr [#Gassama](#) doit être régularisé.
Mais parce qu'il est sans-papiers et souhaite être Français.
Si on suspend la régularisation à l'exploit, que faisons-nous des migrants qui ne sont pas des héros ?



Gaspard Gantzer @gaspardgantzer
Replying to @gaspardgantzer
Il s'appelle Mamoudou Gassama. C'est un migrant sans papiers, arrivé du Mali en septembre. Il a risqué sa vie pour sauver celle d'un enfant. J'espère que notre République saura vite reconnaître le courage de ce héros et lui témoigner notre gratitude pour son geste 🇫🇷🇫🇷🇫🇷

7:50 AM · May 28, 2018

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While motivated by opposite beliefs, both reactions assume that most migrants are not heroes.

But what is a hero? If Macron really likes heroes, shouldn't he revise his view of what he calls “economic migrants”?

What is a hero?

Ethically, a heroic act is defined as an act of high moral value that is not morally obligatory. Such an act is also called “supererogatory” from the medieval Latin *super-erogatio*, which means “giving additionally” – more than is required.

Gassama’s act clearly meets both criteria. What he did – saving a life – is of high moral value but not morally obligatory. While in France, there is a legal obligation to assist persons in danger, in this instance it did not apply to passers-by who had no means of reaching the fourth floor from which the child was suspended.

The question of means is essential. Once Gassama joins the fire brigade, his acts will still be of high moral value, but will not be heroic. Not only will saving lives be his duty, but also he will have swivel ladders and other equipment to do the job. The fact that he was able to save a child “bare-handed” is important for the moral qualification of his action.

We understand why President Macron likes heroes. Doing much good with a few resources is highly praiseworthy. If Gassama is a hero, are there other migrants who save lives “bare-handed”?

Fighting poverty “bare-handed”

Mamoudou Gassama is one of those migrants whom President Macron describes as “economic migrants”, as they come from a poor country. Yet, they are praiseworthy for a form of *collective heroism*.

Starting with very few resources from the outset, and facing numerous obstacles on the way, these migrants are contributing to development and poverty reduction. According to World Bank, migrant remittances to low and middle-income countries reached [US\\$466 billion in 2017](#) and continues to rise.

This US\$466 billion is of high value. It is as if the migrants had collected more money in a year than the five richest entrepreneurs in the world (Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Bernard Arnault and Mark Zuckerberg, according to *Forbes*) have amassed in their whole lives. Except that the migrants repeat this achievement every year and send these five big fortunes to low- and middle-income countries.

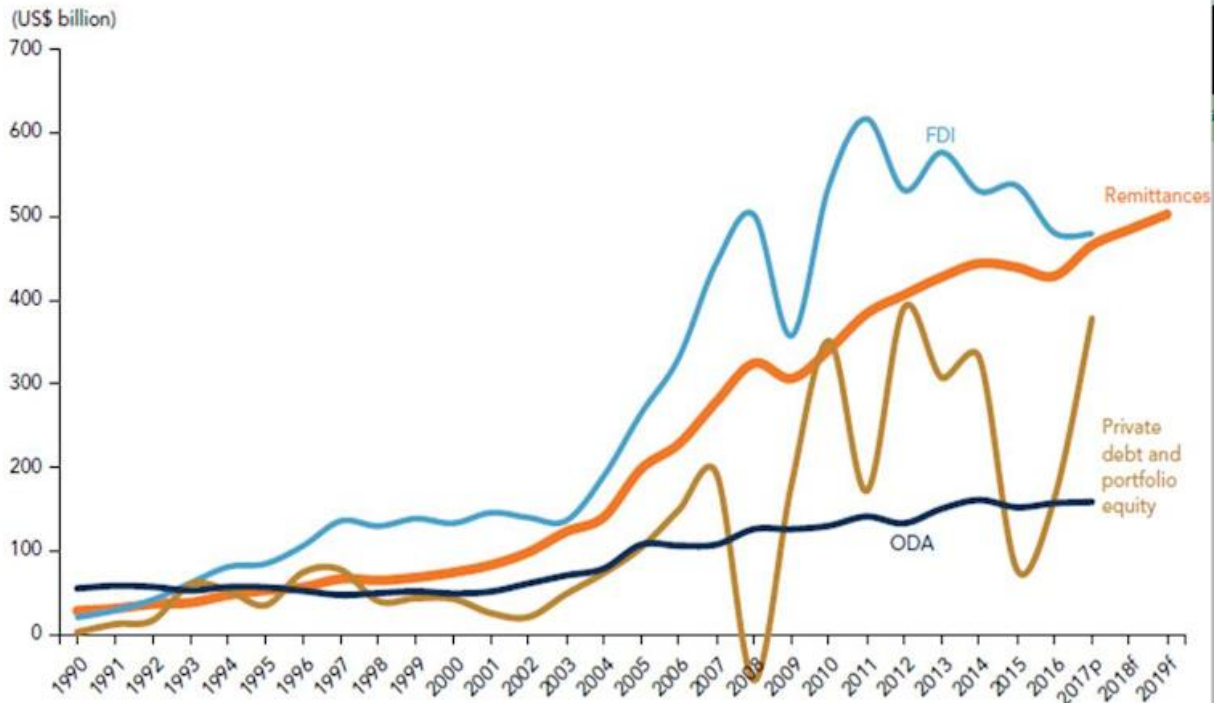
The moral value of remittances has long been discredited by neo-Marxist theories, the claim being that the money are simply for consumption. But we know today that migration and remittances are a powerful lever for development and poverty reduction. Economists Richard Adams and John Page, for example, have shown that a 10 percent increase in migration [reduces poverty by 2 percent](#), i.e. the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day.

Regarding heroism, two simple figures can be kept in mind: **less than 3 percent** of the world’s population do **three times better** than all the powerful governments of the North put together.

Migrants are responsible for the largest monetary flows into low and middle-income countries, with the exception of direct foreign investment (FDI). As the figure below shows, migrants’

remittances have exceeded official development aid (ODA) since 1996. Migrants' financial contributions are three times bigger than those of governments.

FIGURE 1.1 Remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are larger than official development assistance and more stable than private capital flows, 1990–2019



Sources: World Bank staff estimates; World Development Indicators.

Note: FDI = foreign direct investment; ODA = official development assistance. See appendix A in World Bank (2017b) for data and forecast methods.

Are migrants' financial contributions made “bare-handed”? Perhaps not, but the money is earned in conditions where discrimination, exploitation and over-qualification in employment is higher than among non-migrants. Moreover, migrants born in countries of the South have migrated, in the case of more than half of them, to [other countries of the South](#) where wages are lower than in the countries of the North.

Treating heroes as “the world’s misery”?

When their prowess are not being filmed, Emmanuel Macron calls poor migrants like Mamoudou Gassama “economic migrants” and says he cannot “welcome” them.

He echoes the words spoken 30 years ago by Michel Rocard (a former prime minister who served under President François Mitterrand from 1988 to 1991) who said, “We cannot welcome all the world’s misery” (see [video](#)). Since then, the word *misery* is repeatedly used by political leaders, over and over, without blushing. Publicly. In all media. As if migrants from poor countries either could not hear or were too unsophisticated to feel offended. As if the world was obviously divided into those who “welcome” by birth and those who are unsophisticated by birth.

The expression “economic migrant” is less brutal, but it is inaccurate.

Usually, “economic migration” refers to the kind of residence permit (related to work) not to the motivation of the permit holders. Whether those holding the permits came to work in France to be close to the Eiffel Tower or to feed their children is something that migration statistics don’t take into account. What should be taken into account is that in France, red tape makes work permits hard to obtain. Only 10 percent of stay permits are given for economic reasons.

President Macron does not seem interested in statistical data and migration studies. He would have learned, however, that migration is not a threat to world security, as he often say, but a way to double world GDP. Conversely, preventing economic migration is a way to leave [trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk](#), as the development economist Michael Clemens has put it. The gains from open borders would be about the same as the gains from a [“growth miracle”](#) to use John Kennan’s expression. Even the most pessimistic estimates confirm that if borders were to be opened, the worldwide average income per worker would rise [by 12 percent in the short term and by 52 percent in the long term](#).

Mamoudou Gassama’s prowess illustrates the gains from mobility. Without obstacles, he managed to climb up bare-handed to save a child. With our migration policies, we have chosen to create obstacles every step of the way. Those who in spite of all the obstacles still manage to save children are surely heroes.

This article was translated from French by Equal Times editors and [published on June 6](#).