Migration: A Force for Resilience and Broad Positive Social Change within and beyond the ‘Global South’ amid the Climate Crisis?

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INTRODUCTION

In this analysis, migration and its relation with climate change and development are examined through Sen's (1999) capabilities framework for human mobility. Migration is a people-centric activity where one may want to reside in or relocate to a desired area. Discussions around the connection between climate change and migration are growing in academic and governance contexts. Scholars are increasingly recognising migration's role as a strategy for adaptation and development. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) suggests that there is no direct relation between climate change and migration decisions. Viewing migration as merely adaptation can understate the varied causes of forced migration, which include sociology,

economics, politics, and ecology. Addressing climate migration effectively requires considering political and economic processes and their interrelations.

A POSITIVE (RE)FRAMING OF MIGRATION AS ADAPTATION

The migration cycle follows phases of departure, transit, arrival, settlement, and return. Migrants engage in adaptive strategies that enhance personal and communal resilience. For instance, in the departure phase, migrants may sell assets to finance their move, and during settlement, they send remittances, establishing economic links that promote country-wide adaptation. Upon return, they bring financial capital and new skills, which enhance local adaptive capacity. This framing challenges traditional views, positioning migration as a proactive adaptation rather than a failure to cope with climate change.

The literature from the Global South challenges dominant views of migration. Migration serves as a coping strategy for climate change impacts, allowing people to settle in regions with more favourable climates (Boas & Rothe 2014). Such a shift in paradigms makes migration more complex as it is no longer the last option for dealing with climate change, but a rational and timely step, while increasing the capacity of the people and the group as a whole (Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change 2011). According to the studies carried out by van der Land & Hummel (2013), migration has emerged as an important adaptation measure for the younger generations mainly in search of jobs and education. In Senegal, environmental and economic factors shape rural-to-urban migration. Desertification has pushed rural farmers and herders to cities. Remittances sent by migrants support rural development, proving migration aids resilience at both ends. In addition, the remittances sent home by the migrants also help in the development of the rural areas proving that migration aids in making communities more resilient at both ends of the migration.

However, the positive framing of migration as adaptation requires careful assessment. Emphasising international migration as an adaptation practice should acknowledge initial motivations for mobility. Contemporary social movements often focus on environmental issues, which can lead to reliance on vulnerable populations for adaptation, rather than addressing root causes (Castles, 2002; Gemenne, 2011).

A COMPLEX CATEGORISATION OF DEFINING CLIMATE MIGRATION

Research indicates that migration decisions often reflect complex factors beyond climate alone. Adger et al., (2021) find that in Ghana, India, and Bangladesh, migration decisions address livelihood vulnerabilities and socioeconomic conditions, with environmental threats being only part of the decision process. Climate change impacts other structural factors like poverty and political instability, making migration a response to multiple stressors. Different environmental impacts, such as desertification versus rapid-onset events like hurricanes, also influence migration. For example, temporary or permanent displacement may result, depending on specific climate impacts. Defining climate migration requires understanding this complexity, rather than attributing movement solely to climate change (McLeman, 2017).

Climate migration refers to "*the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border*" (IOM 2019). Often, multiple factors influence migration, with climate acting as one of several causes (Black et al., 2011 ; McLeman, 2017). Some people lack resources to migrate, and policies that focus on mobility without supporting those who stay may deepen inequalities. Recognising direct and indirect drivers of mobility is crucial for understanding migration's political and economic underpinnings.

DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON MIGRATION

A decolonial approach critiques Western-centric migration perspectives, which often overlook internal and regional movement within Global South countries. Western migration frameworks downplay agency among Global South migrants, ignoring diverse motivations and processes. In the Global South, rural-to-urban migration reflects poverty and inequality, making internal migration critical to understanding migration trends. This decolonial lens reveals that migration cannot be reduced to environmental or economic causes alone, but instead reflects colonial legacies and structural violence. Addressing migration through this lens reveals a need for policies that tackle systemic issues rather than seeing migration as a cure-all for environmental and economic challenges.

MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD?

Migration for development has financial and knowledge-sharing benefits, as remittances often surpass official development funds (Black et al., 2011). Yet challenges remain, such as brain drain and growing inequality (Shah & Lerche, 2020). Migration's impact on development is often constrained by persistent structural challenges. Addressing development needs through migration alone may reinforce neoliberal views that overlook deeper causes of migration, such as political instability and resource limitations (Shrestha (2019).

IS IMMOBILITY AN OVERLOOKED DIMENSION?

According to Transiskus and Bazarbash (2024), empirical research on the links between environmental change and human (im)mobility is growing. Yet, most studies focus on migration, often overlooking immobility as an expression of agency (Hjälm 2014). Remaining in place can reflect social bonds, economic limitations, or the need to protect jobs and property (Carling & Schewel, 2018). Methodologically, studying spatial continuity is challenging as data often focus on migration, missing the nuanced reasons for staying put. A more fundamental challenge is that determinants of change are generally given priority within the social sciences, and human agency is often conflated with human action – in this context, movement (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Schewel, 2020). Immobility literature suggests that for many, staying requires agency and conscious choice (Stockdale and Haartsen (2018). Recognising immobility's complexities alongside migration could enhance understanding of human responses to environmental risk.

THE CLIMATE MIGRATION-CONFLICT NEXUS

In 2012, a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution defined human security as an “[a]pproach to assist member states in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.” (UNGA, (2012). A vast and diverse range of texts argues against the tendency to securitise climate migration, thus describing environmental migrants as a risk to the world order. Such a viewpoint conceives of climate-induced migration as a source of conflicts and violence, in this case, especially across the North-South divide (Bettini, 2014); Geddes, 2015). Often these kinds of security discourses turn to the apocalyptic

predicting disasters of climate refugees threatening efficient global states (Ransan-Cooper et, al., 2015). The narrative helps to implant biopolitical normative and categorisation discourses towards the population concerned and subjugate under the prevailing capitalist framework. Nonetheless, there is empirical evidence to counter these narratives, arguing that migration, even when driven by environmental factors, does not necessarily lead to conflict. Migration can serve as a pressure release valve, helping to diffuse tensions and alleviate resource scarcity in areas affected by climate change (Gemenne, 2011).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The international governance of climate migration is predominantly fragmented over several hard and soft legal instruments, policies, strategies and action plans of the international community. (Kählin & Weerasinghe, 2018). The positive framing of migration is of great significance to migration governance, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development. It drives the need for change in the current status by advocating for a more inclusive as well as rights-based approach to migration governance by inviting migration as one of the rights of the people and also as a capacity for development and improvement. Moreover, it points out the significance of the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration concerning the facilitating the safe, orderly, and regular migration of people as per the relevant tools and strategies for migration.

Migration in a positive light also has implications for the governance of mobility, adaptation of climate change and promotion of sustainable development. It calls for a move toward a more holistic and rights-based governance of migration that sets migrants as bearers of rights and as partners rather than passive subjects. Given that migration is subjectively viewed as both an adaptation method and a development-promoting strategy, there is a need to change the functionality of existing global governance structures. Policies need to go beyond the straightforward binary of voluntary migration or forced migration and deal with several aspects of human mobility. This calls for the need for integrated policies that combine migration, climate change, and sustainable development strategies, especially in the global south. Also, this means that Policymakers should be willing to apply the rights-based model of

migration governance where migrants are visualised as individuals who may either choose to move in or stay put in the place. This includes facilitating safe and orderly migration pathways, in line with the principles of the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, and ensuring that climate-induced displacement is addressed through international cooperation and burden-sharing (Kählin & Weerasinghe, 2017) Besides this, there is a further justification to include local policymaking perspectives in understanding the case of migrants, reporting both the unique factors surrounding the migrants and the potential triggers of their actions.

A ruling of the UN Human Rights Committee in the case of Teitiota v. New Zealand expands more on particular human rights that are at stake in the processes regarding the adverse impacts of climate change and the effects of disaster, including the right to life. The determination explains that sudden-onset events as well as slow-onset processes can provoke situations where people's cross-border movement is instigated in search of escape from life-threatening situations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) points out in the report the Committee's conclusion that given the nature of these threats, it would be unlawful under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to return people at such places as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to their country, in its case where the consequences of climate change are likely to create life-threatening risks for them (Article 6) or where there are dangers of facing torture or inhuman treatment which is prohibited by law (Article 7 of ICCPR).

A CONCLUDING REMARK

The positive reframing of migration as adaptation and development offers valuable insights into the complex nexus of climate change and human mobility. However, this optimistic view must be balanced with critical analyses of the structural inequalities, power dynamics, and global responsibilities that underpin migration. Addressing climate migration requires a comprehensive, rights-based approach that recognises the agency of migrants while also tackling the root causes of forced displacement. Only through such an inclusive and multi-faceted approach can the potential of migration be fully harnessed for sustainable development and climate resilience.

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