

## A4 | STRUCTURAL ROOTS OF MIGRATION

Since prehistoric times, human populations have been on the move, progressively colonizing most of the planet in search for favourable living conditions. Human flows have been the norm, not the exception, across the centuries, spurred and shaped by a myriad of structural and contextual factors, including environmental, economic and social ones.

Substantial attention has been on migration in recent years, especially in the context of the acute humanitarian crisis associated with flows of forced migration. This chapter focuses on the structural reasons that underlie migration in a globalised world.

### **The dimensions of global migration**

In 2015, the estimated number of international migrants was 244 million up from 173 million in 2000 (UNDESA, 2017). Women constitute slightly less than half of all international migrants. In 2005, the number of internal migrants was calculated at around 763 million (Bell & Charles-Edwards, 2013), almost exclusively the result of relocation from rural to urban areas.

Migration continues to be fuelled by a large number of factors interacting in multiple, complex ways. However, over the past four decades, globalization and neoliberal policies have played a particularly significant role as drivers of both internal and international migration, through a variety of direct and indirect mechanisms.

The number of forcibly displaced<sup>1</sup> has increased from 37 million 10 years ago to 65 – the largest number ever since the international community started keeping records (UNCHR, 2017). Approximately one-third of forcibly displaced people are refugees, that is, people who crossed an international border, while the remainder are internally displaced. More than half of all refugees are children. Most recently, conflicts that have resulted in particularly significant refugee movements include, among others, the Syrian civil war (which has produced 25 per cent of all forcibly displaced people globally), conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (3 million people), South Sudan (1.5 million people), Afghanistan (1 million people) and the Central African Republic (0.5 million people). In addition to forcibly displaced people, it is worth remembering that more than 11 million people, worldwide, are stateless. All of these figures are just estimates, usually quite conservative, as counting people on the move has always been especially difficult.



**Image A4.1** Young boy at a refugee camp in Turkey (Cem Terzi)

Contrary to the widely held notion that refugees are rehabilitated due to the munificence of developed Northern countries, 85 per cent of all refugees live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), up from 70 per cent 10 years ago. By the end of 2014, the country hosting the largest number of refugees was Turkey (UNHCR, 2017).

The complex web of issues that lead to displacement blurs the traditional legal boundaries between migrants and ‘refugees’ – as defined in the 1951 United Nations Convention Related to the Status of Refugees, signed in Geneva (United Nations, 1951) and subsequently expanded by the 1967 Protocol Related to the Status of Refugees (United Nations, 1967). For most migrants, leaving home and crossing international borders is seldom the result of free choice. People migrate when their current situation leaves them without hope and without the possibility of a secure future for their children and themselves. A distinction is often made between ‘voluntary’ migrants and refugees to extend the protection of rights of only who are formally recognized as refugees under international law. This is bureaucratized view of this issue: a view that ignores the fact that the lived experiences of refugees and so-called ‘economic migrants’ are for the most part indistinguishable. Such a view does not address the root causes of migration and displacement. It is not just exceptional events like persecution and conflict that displace people, but also the abysmal conditions of living that a large proportion of the globe’s population is subjected to.

Migration theories have evolved over the past century; from those premised on ‘push/pull’ factors to more nuanced interpretations accounting for the historical, social, economic and cultural forces shaping this phenomenon, as well as for the role played by network ties and transnational identities. In *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Castles, De Haas and Miller (2013) emphasize the complexity, political salience, global nature, and economic and social significance of contemporary migration. Today, migration poses a major challenge to the sovereignty of states, in particular to their ability to regulate movements of people across their borders, and results in diffuse tension, often presented in a dramatic fashion – for example by expressions such as ‘Fortress Europe’, and reflected in the rhetoric and results of recent elections in North America and Europe.

### **Globalization and migration**

Over the past four decades, globalization and neoliberal economic policies have become one of the most significant forces fuelling migration, if not the most important. Globalization has been defined in many ways. Most definitions, however, stress the nature of globalization as a set of processes that make national borders more permeable to social, political and economic activities; amplify planetary interdependence; and accelerate the circulation of capital, goods, information, innovation and ideas (Held et al., 1999, pp. 483–96). While globalization is a multidimensional phenomenon, the economic dimension lies at its heart in contemporary times.

The origins of contemporary globalization can be identified in a number of political and economic events between the 1970s and 1990s, including the debt crises, the ensuing policies of structural adjustment pursued by high-income countries (HICs) through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), and the fall of the Berlin Wall, which turned the model of development represented by the USA and its closest allies into the only apparent alternative (Labonte & Torgerson, 2005, pp. 157–79). Contemporary globalization does present novel characteristics, such as its truly universal reach, the size and power of transnational corporations, the unprecedented, if selective, pressure on governments to open their frontiers to the free movement of goods and capital, as the result of enforceable international agreements, and the speed of movement of capital and goods resulting from the application of revolutionary information and communication technologies and travel and transportation technologies (ibid.). Yet, the roots of contemporary globalization are deep and complex, reaching back in history all the way to the European explorations of the late sixteenth century, the progressive colonization of Latin America, India, South East Asia and Africa, and the ongoing pushing of the interests of the ‘Global North’ in the postcolonial period (Dickinson, 2016). Through the centuries, mercantilism first and capitalism later have progressively pushed their boundaries to seize

the planet. The attempt to create a global marketplace is the core endeavour of contemporary globalization.

Over the centuries, the expansion of European interests has consistently resulted in social dislocation and displacement. The process originated in England where, between the late seventeenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, advances in agriculture, industry, energy and transportation technologies pushed millions of peasants out of rural areas and into industrializing cities. Subsequently the wave hit the New World, producing the largest human migration movement in history that radically disrupted the lives of indigenous people. Traditional subsistence activities and social relations were wiped out and replaced with the structure and mechanisms of the colonial economy. Simultaneously, the need for human resources required to support the economy of plunder enforced by European powers resulted in the forced relocation of 12 million Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves (*ibid.*). This wave continues and the process of integration of increasingly large areas of the globe into the capitalist economic market has persisted even after the formal end of the colonial era. Of course, some of the original colonies, the USA in particular, have joined in the race to expand the economic market while local elites in LMICs have consistently allied themselves with the interests of the Global North.

Today, those who find themselves excluded from the decentralized, innovation-based, flexible networks of production, representing the most recent phase of capitalism (Castells, 2000), or at least those among them who have the resources to move in search of a better life, do move. In fact, most migrants still move, either internally or internationally, in search of employment opportunities. Recent International Labour Organization data (ILO 2015) suggests that approximately 72 per cent of all migrants 15 years old or older are migrant workers and, if we include in the count their families, more than 90 per cent of all migrants move in search of employment.

Globalization and neoliberal policies create two tiers of migration. On the one hand, highly skilled professionals are for the most part welcome in High Income Countries (HICs) and sometimes even actively 'poached', as is often the case, for example, with healthcare professionals (Aluttis, Bishaw & Frank, 2014). On the other hand, unskilled workers trying to enter Europe, North America or Australia face old and new barriers and increasingly restrictive immigration policies. These barriers push them to join the legion of 'undocumented' or 'illegal' migrants. This, in turn, strengthens the power of employers and reduces the options available to migrants to demand fair wages and safe working conditions (Dickinson, 2016). Anthropologist Tamara Wilson suggests that one of the aims of increasingly restrictive immigration policies is to keep undocumented immigrant women working in the southern USA separate from the children they left behind in Mexico, therefore decoupling their productive value from their reproductive one (McGuire & Martin, 2007,

pp. 178–88). Meanwhile, transnational corporations take advantage of the huge mass of dislocated, unskilled and unemployed workers remaining in LMICs to minimize production costs.

In many ways, the ‘age of globalization’ and the ‘age of migration’ coincide. Large numbers of people continue to be impoverished and displaced by policies that encourage privatization, impose financial deregulation, promote regressive taxation, create increasingly significant incentives for transnational corporations and require LMICs to open their borders to imports, creating situations that make local competition unsustainable. Concurrently HICs protect their own markets through tariffs and subsidies on agricultural production (Labonte & Torgerson, 2005, pp. 157–79).

There are indirect ways in which economic drivers of migration act. The imposition of macroeconomic policies that favour local elites tends to promote political instability and conflict or exacerbate pre-existing ones. The history of colonialism and post-colonialism is a history of conflict resulting from increasing destabilization and, often, the direct intervention of HICs interested in maintaining global market mechanisms (Dickinson, 2016). Local and regional conflicts have been a major driver of displacement since immediately after the end of the Second World War, from the Korean war to the Vietnam war, from the countless ethnic conflicts that have raged and continue to rage in Africa to the ‘dirty war’ fought by the USA in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>2</sup> and up to the most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition, the environmental externalities produced by the dominant model development, characterized by extreme consumerism and increased global trade are reaching unimaginable proportions. Environmental degradation and climate change are already displacing people. As suggested by Butler (2014, p. 1) climate change will “act as a risk multiplier, compounding pre-existing socially and politically-mediated drivers of adverse health consequences, including conflict”. The interdependence created by globalization does not guarantee equity and health does not automatically follow wealth. Much of the progress in wealth (and health) has been achieved at the price of environmental destruction and climate change; and the health of people cannot be seen as separate from the health of the planet as a whole. As Hathaway and Boff (2009) have observed, for the first time in the history of humankind all of the major crises we are facing – environmental degradation and climate change, poverty and conflict – are of our own making. As previously discussed, these crises, all contributing to migration and adding to the desperation of the displaced, are the result of the way in which the globalized economy works, and not of isolated ‘incidents’.

### **The discourse on migration: omissions, double standards and exclusions**

Not surprisingly, most analysts and commentators steer away from directly addressing the core factors that impact human mobility, resulting, simultaneously, in the suffering of hundreds of millions of people and the political and

identity crises we are witnessing today in the ‘Western world’. The fact that dramatic global inequities are the prime movers of human dislocation and that these inequities are inextricably related to both historical and contemporary globalization is a reality that is for the most part ignored or underemphasized. As observed by Pécoud (2015) in his analysis of what he calls “international migration narratives”, this reality is masked by a dominant approach that aims to bring order to an intrinsically messy and menacing phenomenon, favours based on supposed “global governance” and effectively depoliticizes migration. Pécoud’s analysis is a useful starting point for tracing the similarities and links between narratives on migration and some of the central rhetorical constructs of the dominant economic discourse. Both ignore the structural mechanisms linking neoliberalism to global inequities and discount the lived experiences of the excluded and marginalized. A few examples of these links are briefly presented below.

*Migration and development* Recently, the idea that migration, when supported by appropriate policies, contributes to inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development in both home and host communities has gained momentum, backed by impressive statistics. In 2014, for example, migrants from LMICs sent home an estimated US\$ 436 billion in remittances, a 4.4 per cent increase over the 2013 level (World Bank Group, 2016), far exceeding official development assistance and, excluding China, foreign direct investment. These funds are often used to improve the livelihood of families and, sometimes, of communities through investments in health, sanitation, housing, infrastructure and education. It has been emphasized (ibid.) how destination countries can also benefit from migration. Migrants often fill gaps left by critical labour shortages in host countries, create jobs as entrepreneurs, and contribute in terms of taxes and social security resources. As some of the most dynamic forces in society, they can also forge new paths in science, medicine and technology and enrich their host communities by promoting cultural diversity (UNDESA, 2016). The World Bank, for example, considers migration to be a “proven development strategy pursued by agents to maximize their needs and values” (Barnett & Webber, 2010).

This perspective ignores the human and social costs of migration. In addition, it exemplifies one of the most common and pernicious double standards found in the discourse to ‘mainstream’ migration: as long as it is ‘others’ who migrate, then migration can be considered as a viable solution! This approach is strongly influenced by the body of literature that, since the 1980s, has emphasized the role of migrants’ agency in the decision to resettle. Migrants are not a homogenous group, and their decisions to move usually come at the end of a long and laboured process, are informed by hugely diverse considerations and are often not even individual decisions (Castles, De Haas & Miller, 2013, p. 37). While the issue of agency of migrants in the decision to

resettle is not unimportant, what is not accounted for is how extreme poverty, precariousness, insecurity and despair dramatically reduce if not entirely erase the agency of millions of migrants.

*Climate change and migration* Given the complex relation, the impact of climate change on displacement is a highly contested area (Bowles & Butler, 2014). A number of studies suggest that between 200 million and 1 billion people will be displaced by climate change by the middle of the present century (Christian Aid, 2007; Myers, 2002, pp. 609–13). Even if the most optimistic projections were correct, human movements of this magnitude would have an impact, globally, that is truly difficult to comprehend. To understand the magnitude of the looming crisis we can contrast the projected displacement numbers with the deep social and political crisis that is currently shaking the European Union as a result of the influx of a few million refugees and migrants.

There is a debate regarding which of the two terms, – ‘environmental migrants’ or ‘environmental refugees’ – should be used to describe those displaced by climate change. Scholars who favour the term ‘environmental migrant’ have suggested that calling people displaced by climate change as ‘refugees’ would damage the interests of *real* refugees. The use of the term ‘climate migrant’ is part of a discourse that emphasizes migration as an adaptation strategy to climate change, and one that should be encouraged and properly managed. With such an interpretation the notion of adaptation changes from a collective phenomenon, based on political and social transformation of external conditions, to an individual response (Felli, 2013). Climate migration is being promoted as a solution to climate change only to the extent it can be ‘managed’ through rules, practices and norms. These rules often require that migration be prevented. At the same time the move from the recognition of climate refugees to the management of climate migration shifts the discourse from the arena of international law and human rights to one in which migrants are individuals with an entrepreneurial ethos. Climate migrants are no longer victims in need of justice but entrepreneurs who can lift themselves out of poverty and at the same time contribute to the ‘resilience’ of their vulnerable communities. ‘Vulnerability’ is interpreted as a function of people’s exposure, and ‘resilience’ as their individual ability to adapt. Solutions, therefore, are no longer political but individual.

Even if we were to accept migration to be a form of adaptation to climate change, several fundamental questions remain. First, who would migrate? Migration, especially to international destinations, is more likely for those who are better off and better educated. As usual, the most marginalized are left behind and pay for those who leave, as the departure of even a very small proportion of the population can significantly diminish a community’s overall social capital, particularly in communities where wealth and education are highly concentrated (Bowles & Butler, 2014).

The second question is about the most likely destinations for climate refugees. Even in scenarios of very severe climate change, it is believed that most movements will occur over short distances, while long-distance migration will occur only when migrants can follow well-established routes (McLeman, 2010, pp. 286–316). From the perspective of the ‘Global North’ the difference is significant, as migration-related issues are often framed in terms of security<sup>2</sup>. From the perspective of those who have to move and their fundamental human rights, however, there is very little difference. In all cases, they are forced to leave their lives, homes and communities behind. Short-distance displacement might indeed have an even more significant impact on their lived experiences. Most of these movements would be within LMICs, as they are the ones most affected by the extreme consequences of climate change, and short-distance movements would be predominantly from rural to urban areas. Their net result would be increased stress on already limited economic opportunities and infrastructures. Already fragile economies, health systems and entire sectors would be severely compromised and could fail altogether (Bowles and Butler, 2014).

*Social costs of migration: fractured families* The long-term separation of families, a complex phenomenon of massive proportions, with a clear intergenerational health impact, receives little attention. Human movements of the magnitude we observe today inevitably impact family structures. Economic globalization has affected core relationships of care, such as the separation and reunion of mothers and children (Falicov 2007, pp. 157–71), ostensibly the most problematic form of separation.

The exact number of fractured families is unknown. Yet, there is evidence that the numbers are very large. In China, for example, between 150 and 200 million people are internal migrants who move from rural to urban areas in search of work, while leaving tens of millions of children behind. Often, parents migrate when their children are very small and the separation can last for up to 10 to 15 years (Liu et al., 2010). In the Philippines, it is estimated that a quarter of all children under 18 live separated from their parents (Smeekens, Stroebe and Abakoumkin, 2012, pp. 2250–57). In Mexico, over the past four decades, migration has become the most common cause of ‘families without a father’, a phenomenon that principally affects poor, rural families (Nobles, 2013, pp. 1303–14).

The main reason parents have to leave their children behind is related to the uncertain nature of migration. Many migrants moving to Europe or North America are unskilled and undocumented. Once in the country of resettlement, they cannot leave again until their immigration status has changed. (Adams 2000, pp. 19–27). Separation may impact all members of the immediate and extended family as well as, often, the communities of origin and of resettlement. Among children left behind, for example, depression and suicidal ideation,



anxiety, behavioural problems and substance abuse are all conditions that have been associated with separation (Miller, 2013, pp. 316–23). On the other hand, migrant parents experience a deep and damaging sense of ambivalence with regard to their left-behind children because of the tension between sacrificing their physical presence and having a chance to provide financially for their families (Grzywacz et al., 2006, pp. 85–97).

There is little discussion in academic literature about this phenomenon and as regards interventions in support of fractured families (Cortinois and Aguilera, forthcoming). This is in stark contrast with the rich literature focusing on the impact of separation and divorce on children in Western countries. The tens if not hundreds of millions of families fractured due to long-term internal or international economic migration are, essentially, invisible.

Sometimes, the problem of fractured families is downplayed by saying that these families come from strong traditions of collective care and therefore children left behind can be entrusted to members of the extended family or other community members. In addition, some authors use terms like ‘diasporic culture’ or ‘culture of migration’ to describe populations such as, for example, those living in the Caribbean region. Adams (2000, p. 20), at least partially misinterpreting the intentions of Hall (1995) whom he cites, notes that: “Caribbean culture is a diasporic culture, centered around a multiplicity of ethnic groups who identify with an ancestral home outside of the region. Therefore, the trauma of loss and the longing for what has been lost is an inherent part of the culture (Hall 1995). These people are migrant people”.

It is difficult to imagine a more ahistorical and fundamentally neocolonial analysis, one that normalizes displacement. It ignores the fact that it was the massive slave trade that forced people to move to the Caribbean region in the first place and that international labour markets are forcing people to move, once again in very large numbers.

## Conclusions

Migrants face a triple burden of victimization. First, they suffer the consequences of a model of development that dislocates them and drastically reduces their options, while resulting in ecological mayhem that further disrupts their connection to the land. Second, they are affected by the experiences of precariousness, exclusion, isolation and detention imposed on them by those who benefit, at least in the short term, from that same model of development. And finally, they are hurt by the misconceptions, biases and hypocrisy that distort the largely technocratic and bureaucratized debate on global human displacement.

## Notes

1 Forced displacement may be the result of persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation and other causes. Displaced people may remain within the boundaries of their country of origin, therefore becoming internally displaced, or cross international borders, becoming refugees or asylum seekers. The complexity of contemporary migration fluxes is increasingly blurring the distinction between migrants and forcibly displaced people, as briefly discussed later in this chapter.

2 See Curtis, Fussell & DeWaard (2015, pp. 1269–93) and Castles, De Haas & Miller (2013, p. 198) for more on this.

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