Migration and the risk of violent conflict and instability

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Question

What robust evidence is there that migration (including internal migration and forced displacement) contributes to the risk of violent conflict and instability?

Contents

1. Overview

The central finding of this review is that despite disciplinary differences of conceptual framing and method, **the literature agrees that there is nothing inevitable about migration leading to conflict.** Instead, it is the nature of socioeconomic and political conditions in receiving areas that determines the risk of political violence, not the fact of migration itself.

Rural-urban migration and climate-induced migration are the two pathways to violent conflict considered in this report.[1] The literatures and the cases they consider are distinct but the analytical efforts and search for causal linkages are shared. The literature on the link between migration and violent conflict and instability straddles a large number of academic disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political demography, geography, peace and conflict studies, political science, and many others. This rapid review surveys a sample of the academic literature only and has not engaged policy literature except through academic references to it. This is both for reasons of time and because of what appears to be a weak evidence base for most policy reports on the issue.

2. Contextualising the migration→conflict debate

There are repeated references in the academic literature to the fact that policy debates and media reporting are not informed by research findings and are often 'ahead of the evidence' (eg: Muggah 2012, Selby 2017, Hartman 2010). Scholars argue that academic and policy focus on migration in the last couple of decades has been driven by Western countries and governments perceiving migration as a threat to the established order, leading to a securitisation of migration and 'hardening of neo-Malthusian positions' (Muggah 2012:14). Hartman analyses the discourse around climate refugees and argues that US national security policy has been shifting towards taming 'ungoverned spaces' that are perceived as threats to US interests; she finds that development assistance has been increasingly subsumed under this objective and that the approach to climate-induced migration is not driven by enough evidence.

3. Rural-urban migration

Rural-urban migration has been of much policy concern in recent years, with policymakers focused on curbing inflows into cities. Most scholarly works reviewed for this report believe this focus to be misplaced (eg: Ostby 2016, Montgomery et al. 2008, Beall and Fox 2011) while recognising the tremendous challenges that rapid urbanisation presents in most developing countries. This literature notes that that a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors drives in-migration to cities and towns. Poverty, war, natural disasters, and recurring adverse climate conditions drive people out of rural areas, but even in the absence of these factors, urbanisation is necessitated by an expanding global economy – as incomes rise, the demand for non-agricultural goods and services rises, stimulating the growth of urban-based production (Beall

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[1] Time constraints prevented the inclusion of refugee militarisation, but the logic of analysis and the debates characterising the field appear to be similar.

and Fox 2011). However, states are failing to provide adequate security, employment, housing, and other essential services in cities, leading to increased instability, violence, and political upheaval. Violence is produced by the interaction between socio-economic deprivation and migration, which serves to further strain already stretched resources and exacerbate political conflicts.

Contribution to urban growth

It is a common mistake to overstate the contribution of rural-urban migration to urban population growth. Montgomery (2008) notes that the urban demography literature (and this could be extended to contemporary policy discourse on urbanisation) does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that about 60% of the urban growth rate in developing countries is accounted for by natural urban population increases (excess of births over deaths) and 40% to migration and spatial expansion or reclassification of rural areas (ibid: 761). For similar reasons, Beall and Fox (2011) write that 'the traditional research and policy focus on rural-urban migration among those concerned with the potentially social destabilising effects of urbanisation is misplaced' (ibid: 5). This trend continues today: according to a 2018 UN report, urban growth in developing countries results primarily from natural increase with the exception of some countries in Asia and Africa (China, Thailand, Rwanda, Indonesia, Namibia) where rural-urban migration has played a major role (UN 2018: 6).

Link with violent conflict

Scholars differ in their understandings of how rural-urban migration impacts conflict and research conclusions are often contradictory or arrived at through such methodologically different approaches as to be incomparable. A common insight across these studies however, is that the **interaction between migration and poor socio-economic conditions leads to violence and unrest**.

From the qualitative literature, Beall and Fox (2011) find very little evidence that the process of urbanisation is associated with an elevated risk of conflict or violence in Africa or elsewhere. They write that 'the process of urbanization is a neutral phenomenon, but it may contribute to a transformation in the geography and intensity of violence if underlying socioeconomic and political risk factors are not adequately addressed' (ibid: 8). Scambari (2013) analyses how conflict and instability in Dili's (capital of East Timor) squatter settlements is shaped by rural-urban migration. According to the analysis, migration is a contributing factor to gang violence through its interaction with poverty, overcrowding, ethnic heterogeneity, and the unstable nature of authority in these areas.

Box 1: Rural-urban migration and violence in Dili, East Timor (Scambari, 2013)

Dili's gang violence is an example of how migration interacts with socio-economic deprivation to produce conflict. The city experienced a massive rural-urban influx when wartime displacement and post-war rural-urban migration led to an eight-fold increase in the city's population between 1975 and 2010. Migrants and receiving communities – often linked to

migrants through familial, ethnic, and locality-specific ties – struggled with poverty, space shortages, and inadequate service provision.

The hybrid and unstable nature of authority in these settlements mitigated against the establishment of effective informal social control by 'traditional' or rural-based institutions, and gangs (locally known as martial arts groups or MAGs and set up by the Indonesian military during the Indonesian occupation) and 'big men' quickly became powerful. Able to dispense small-scale patronage (small cash loans, alcohol, etc.) and attract young men into their fold, MAGs are a major force in Dili that frequently engage in violent conflict (ibid: 1940).

Urban violence along the lines of village-based or district-based identities is a common phenomenon, i.e. place of origin continues to inflect meaning and structures conflict. Although fighting between gangs is 'often glossed as competition, quite frequently it is between groups from the same district—for example, between Bobonaro families or between Ainaro families' (ibid:1944). Following on from this, 'gangs or MAGs clearly often serve as extensions of their communities or families in enacting vigilante or payback justice in communal disputes over resources, and perpetuate conflicts that are often rural in origin, and often of a longstanding, historical nature. They are very much part of their community and membership is tightly bound in a nexus of family, linguistic, rural and urban territorial identity'. (ibid: 1946-47)

Existing quantitative research on conflict and urban population growth also does not support the concern that urban growth increases the chances of violence. In a widely cited study, Buhaug and Urdal (2013) find no support for what they call the 'urbanisation bomb', i.e. the hypothesis that urban population growth leads to increases in political violence. The study does not distinguish between in-migration and natural population growth, but of course rural-urban migration is a contributing factor to population growth in most developing countries.

Ostby (2016) is the only large-N quantitative study that explicitly tests how migration-induced urbanisation is linked to violence.[2] Analysing a sample consisting of 34 major cities in 31 countries in Africa and Asia over a 20-year period (1986-2006), she finds that

> '[i]t is not the actual movement of rural people into the cities that creates social upheaval. Rather overall poor and unequal educational opportunities as socioeconomic marginalisation of rural—urban migrants seems to matter for lethal forms of urban political violence. Hence, judging from this study, city governments and other decision-makers are best advised to aim at facilitating more equitable access to education and basic social services among city dwellers. Establishing formal institutions to help migrants assimilate into the social and economic life of the city might mitigate social fragmentation and reduce the levels of urban violence. Where there is political will, there may be significant scope for reducing urban inequalities' (ibid: 509).

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[2] According to Ostby herself, writing in 2016, and a rapid search has not turned up others.

Ostby mentions the example of Thailand's slum upgrading programme which was highly successful in improving access to services for thousands of households ,and there is strong evidence from Rwanda demonstrating that a combination of political will and purposeful investment can reduce the prospects of migration creating urban unrest.

Box 2: Rwanda: a model of successful urbanisation? (Goodfellow and Smith, 2013)

Between 1991 and 2001, the population of Kigali trebled despite the death of around 1 million Rwandans. The urban population of the country grew at 18% in the aftermath of the genocide, in part as returning refugees sought anonymity. 18% was – and remains – a virtually unprecedented growth rate anywhere in the world. And yet, Kigali became an orderly city, one in which violence was a rarity. How did this happen?

Violence was frequent in the fast-expanding city in the latter half of the 1990s, but against the odds Kigali took a different path. The police were consolidated into a disciplined and remarkably small force and the use of overt violence by the state declined markedly. The ruling party – the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) – benefited from what some have called 'genocide guilt' on part of donors (Reyntjens 2004 quoted in Goodfellow and Smith: 3190) and aid money flowed through Kigali. A great deal of urban infrastructure was built, but perhaps more importantly, this money strengthened the RPF's political hold and allowed it to put down deep roots in society and thus exert control over the city. The process was not inclusive, nor was it uncontroversial, and much has been written about the specificities of Rwandan governance (see for example Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012). However, Rwanda defies the migration→conflict hypothesis and is an example of how history can combine with politics to produce a very different outcome.

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4. Climate-induced migration

There is a large and growing literature on climate-induced migration. The logic linking rural-urban migration and conflict applies equally to climate-induced migration and conflict[3] and, again similarly, most of the evidence points at conflict emerging from the interaction of climate-induced migration with specific existing political and economic conditions in receiving countries. Critical voices within this field point to the ideologically charged nature of the debate on the climate crisis as well as migration, the inadequacy of research methods used to date, and the impossibility of producing 'clear actionable evidence once more numbers have been crunched' (Selby 2014: 848). **While some studies have found relatively direct links between environmental migration and conflict (eg: Reuveny 2007), more have disputed this,** including by finding that

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[3] Although Reuveny (2007) observes that the scope and speed of this migration will be different. Climate change has so far induced slow changes, and when migration flows are small and slow migrants can be absorbed more smoothly, but he argues that more dramatic and rapid changes can be expected in the near future, in which case 'the forces promoting conflict in the receiving area may be stronger *ceteris paribus*' (ibid: 660).

migration is a mechanism of adaptation and thus conflict mitigation (eg: Black et al. 2011, Hartmann 2010).

Brozska and Frohlich (2016) review the arguments for establishing causal links between i) climate change and migration and ii) migration and conflict on the other. On the latter, they find that existing understandings are insufficiently complex and case studies present different – often contradictory – conclusions. For example experiences in Bangladesh and the northern part of India corroborate the hypothesis that migration increases conflict. The settlement of Bengali flood and storm victims on native land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts aggravated a drawn-out guerrilla war which ended in the late 1990s. Assam and Tripura also experienced violence between Bengali migrants and receiving populations. Reasons for the violence included ethnic tensions and competition over resources, a greater propensity to violence on part of refugees enjoying state support, refugees wanting to settle for the long term in the receiving areas, and refugees that had previously experienced violent conflict with the receiving population.

Brozska and Frohlich maintain that such clear examples of migration leading to conflict are rare. In most cases, the relationship between migration and the onset or intensification of violence is significantly more speculative. As evidence, the authors cite examples from South Iraq, Syria, and Palestine where a multitude of other factors could reasonably be assumed to be equally important drivers of conflict. Raleigh et al. (2008) and Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006) also find little evidence of a significant link between environmental migration and the onset of violent conflict. They argue that **migrants generally have limited resources to organise violence.** Again, the problem seems to be that there is often no clear, non-ideological justification for privileging one causal relationship over another in explaining the onset of violence.

Reuveny (2007) analyses 38 cases of climate-induced migration and finds that 19 out of 38 exhibited no significant conflict, and 14 of the conflict cases involved intra-state conflict, 'suggesting that conflict is less likely when migrants and residents are of the same ethnicity and religion, as is often the case for internal migration. It is also possible that the arrival of these migrants benefited the receiving areas' (ibid: 668). He concludes that 'environmental problems *alone* (sic) do not explain the outcomes reported, but they do appear to play important contributing roles in these episodes' (ibid: 668).

There is however not much empirical support for even Reuveny's relatively cautious causal theory. The evidence on climate-induced mass migration is considered to be too weak (Brzoska and Frohlich 2016; Frohlich 2016) and scholars think political stability, economic conditions, state capacity, etc. appear empirically more relevant than migration. This position is supported by a recent study by Cattaneo and Bosetti (2017) that interrogates the state of the literature on the issue. The study finds **no significant relationship between the presence of international climate migrants and conflict in destination countries**. Indeed, the authors find that causal links are not adequately tested in the literature and that even if natural disasters do increase the risk of conflict, the literature does not explore the specific channels through which this relationship emerges, thereby weakening the argument.

Climate change, migration, and war in Syria – searching for explanations

In 2015 the media exploded with stories about the link between climate change and the violence in Syria.[4] The widespread (partial) explanation of the roots of the Syrian crisis was as follows: climate change led to drought, drought led to migration, migration led to conflict. While no one believes that climate change, drought and migration were the sole cause of Syria's civil war, distinct causal claims were made about the role of climactic factors by world leaders, journalists, government reports, defence think tanks, academics, activists and others.

In 2017, a group of scholars led by Jan Selby from the University of Sussex examined the evidence underlying these widely circulated claims linking climate change, migration, and violence. They found the bulk of assertions and arguments relied almost exclusively on three peer-reviewed studies which have been inordinately influential in shaping policy opinion and media coverage. All three studies, and most other discussions, argue that carbon emissions and global warming may have contributed to drought in Syria; that this drought led to large-scale internal migration; and that these migrants were significant contributors to the unrest that was sparked in 2011 which subsequently spiralled into civil war.

Selby et al. (2017) found 'meagre' and 'extremely weak' evidence underlying each of these claims, with the authors observing that 'no attempt is made within these studies either to statistically correlate climactic and conflict variable or to make use of original interview or ethnographic research; instead all three studies rely exclusively on journalists in and policy advocacy sources. Moreover, none of them refers to the body of academic literature on the causes of Syria's civil war' (239), something that Hartman (2010) also notes about the literature on Darfur's war as a 'climate conflict'.

They present two reasons that suggest the contrary, i.e. that drought-induced migration does *not* seem to have had any significant impact on the unrest. Firstly, interview data conducted by one of the authors for a research project with Syrian refugees shows that migrants from drought-affected areas did not participate in protests, were not targets of subsequent repression, and left as soon as protests started and returned to their regions. Secondly, none of the political demands made by Syria's early protest movements related directly to either drought or migration. Had migrants been significantly involved, this would have been reflected in the discourse (they would have been targeted as 'the problem' or been the ones making demands). Instead, demands centred on civil rights, political freedoms, and economic liberalisation grievances (the authors go on to list concrete demands). They conclude that the evidence is not strong enough to make the arguments that have now become commonplace regarding the climactic roots of the Syrian crisis.

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[4] See for example 'Researchers link Syrian conflict to a drought made worse by climate change', New York Times, March 2, 2015; 'Climate change helped spark Syrian war, study says', National Geographic, March 2, 2015; 'Global warming contributed to Syria's 2011 uprising, scientists claim'. The Guardian, March 2, 2015.

5. Conditions exacerbating migration→conflict

To systemise the observation common across the literature, i.e. that migration interacts with a host of other factors to create specific violent and non-violent outcomes, Brzoska and Frohlich's (2016) typology of receiving regions may be useful. They identify three types of receiving regions as more conflict-prone than others, although they are careful to avoid statements that imply necessity. The classification is derived from a survey of climate-induced migration and conflict but may be equally applicable to rural-urban and other types of migration[5].

- **Regions with extreme resource scarcity**. Temporary migrations into such regions are unlikely to prompt conflict but if populations appear to be settling permanently, chances of violence increase. Resource-poor regions usually host refugees fleeing war and natural disasters and are not chosen by those in search of employment or improved quality of life. International humanitarian assistance usually accompanies the influx of such forced migrants and alleviates the most critical scarcities, but because they are temporary (at least at first), migrants are unlikely to compete for land and employment opportunities. Violent conflict is therefore unlikely at this point. It becomes much more likely however, when people have no option to return home or choose to settle in the host country and enter the competition for scarce resources.

- **Regions with high levels of pre-existing conflict.** When migrants move into communities with on-going conflicts, the likelihood of them becoming a trigger for violence is higher. In particular, when migrants shift the demographic balance in places where identity conflicts are already underway, migration is more likely to result in the intensification or initiation of violence.

- **Regions unwilling to accept 'others'**. People may move into communities unwilling to accept them. Despite ample resources, discourses in these receiving communities often pivot around perceptions of scarcity (unemployment, reductions in standards of living etc.) and perceived threats to traditional values and lifestyles.

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[5] It could also be expanded, based on the literature reviewed here, to include state capacity in the receiving region.

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