

Appraising the role of the environment as a shaping element of migrants' *fragmented journeys*

Elodie Hut¹

When studying the multi-causality of human (im)mobility, environmental changes are increasingly identified as primary migration or displacement drivers (IDMC, 2019). At the same time, the **minimalist perspective** suggests that the situation is in fact more complex and that environmental drivers interact with economic, social, demographic and political factors in shaping migration decision-making and trajectories (Suhrke, 1993; Hugo, 1996). As such, we must acknowledge the existence of a **continuum between the different drivers and patterns of mobility**. Focusing on the “**new mobilities**” paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006), which cuts across a wide range of disciplines and centres on the study of the movement itself, rather than on its drivers, **it seems relevant to connect the concept of ‘fragmented journeys’ to environmentally-induced mobility**. This can be done by interrogating the extent to which environmental factors (both sudden-onset and slow-onset) influence contemporary mixed migration flows and pathways in both space and time, from areas of origin to areas of transit and/or destination, throughout different migration phases, as opposed to analysing them as mere *drivers* of initial outward mobility. This is the aim of the MIGRADAPT project², which uses the concept of *fragmented journeys* as one of its founding hypotheses, suggesting that **environmental factors (and the perceptions of them), in their interaction with socio-economic factors, play a role throughout migrants’ fragmented journeys to Europe – and more specifically to Belgium**.

From transit migration to fragmented migration or (im)mobilities

Aiming to move away from the notions of “**transit**” or “**irregular**” migration, which can be deemed politically charged, inaccurate and essentialist in nature – as these often interpret ‘*in transit*’ migrants’ intentions and movement outcomes as fixed rather than to conceive transit zones as potentially evolving intermediate or ‘*in-between*’ spaces – Collyer and De Haas embrace a more dynamic categorisation of transit migration through adopting the notions of “**fragmented migration**” (2012) or “**fragmented journeys**” (Collyer, 2010). As such, migration is recognized as a *process* with varying intentions, stages and outcomes. Fragmented journeys can be characterized as prolonged and non-linear migration processes “interspersed with periods of fixity” with “individuals experiencing a disjointed succession of changing projects, community attitudes and state categorisations” (Collyer and De Haas, 2012:478-479).

The notions of “fragmented journeys”, “**turbulent trajectories**” (Schapendonk, 2012) or “**onward migration**” (Ahrens, Kelly and van Liempt, 2014) for instance, can be useful tools in the study of the role of environmental factors and migration patterns under the *new mobilities paradigm*, as they **focus on the individual, ever-changing, erratic, non-linear and complex nature of today’s mobility patterns**, enabling us to acknowledge the multi-causality and complexity of today’s migration aspirations, causalities and trajectories. Moreover, such endeavours should be indissociable from a broader analysis of **immobility** applied to environmental changes (Foresight, 2011; Zickgraf, 2018). In this context, a new concept, which could be named “**fragmented (im)mobilities**”, could be brought forward to explore and describe the complex features of migrant populations’ movements, the different types of disruptions that intervene across the mobility *spectrum*, as well as their wider implications on social space and time, in a dynamic and integrated manner.

The MIGRADAPT project: Objectives and Methods

MIGRADAPT is a transnational, qualitative and multi-sited research project which seeks to study the perceived role of the environment in shaping migration journeys to Belgium from selected areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Morocco and Senegal. It looks at adaptation and resilience from the respective vantage points of the migrants, of their community of origin and of their community of destination (Blocher and Gemeinne, 2017). Through collecting personal migration stories via in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in both Belgium and selected areas of origin, the project seeks to gain insight on respondents’

¹ PhD Candidate, The Hugo Observatory, University of Liège (Belgium). Email: elodie.hut@uliege.be

² More information can be obtained here: <http://labos.ulg.ac.be/hugo/migradapt>

fragmented journeys and perceptions of environmental changes. Given the complexity and multi-faceted nature of today's mobility drivers, a **qualitative approach**, involving migrants, returnees, members of the household of origin and host populations is used to reveal the diversity of migration trajectories and life stories of people situated along an intricate migration continuum.

Although it can be difficult to directly correlate environmental changes with migrants' fragmented journeys, we can easily argue that **environmental factors – beyond constituting a potential driver of migration – can exacerbate and therefore shape these fragmented journeys as well as their overall consequences**, by impacting (among others):

- The *choice and evolution of the migration route and of (potentially multiple) 'transit' and 'destination' areas* (depending on one's perceptions of environmental changes);
- The *(legal) status one may obtain in the host community* (depending on the institutional recognition of environmental factors as a driver that may justify assistance and protection).
- The *environmental resilience in communities of origin* (through (im)material remittances of diaspora members and returnees).
- The *environmental resilience in host communities, whether this impact is positive* (improved resilience, adaptive capacity, disaster preparedness through new skills, political awareness or financial resources) or *negative* (maladaptation risks).

Findings from the MIGRADAPT project

Although field work and data collection are still ongoing at the time of writing, interviews conducted so far have already uncovered cases of “fragmented journeys” – although very few respondents reported having been directly affected by environmental changes. The description of these sometimes “**chaotic, disorderly and uncertain**” journeys (Lefebvre, 2018:60) sheds light on their length and non-linearity both outside and inside of Europe, on the diversity of modes of transport used (depending on available resources), on the difficulties faced in navigating legal statuses once in Europe, on migrants' heavy reliance upon a wide range of formal and informal networks (including smugglers) throughout their migration experience, as well as on the preservation of strong transnational ties with communities of origin.

The following example from the project illustrates the concept of “fragmented journeys” particularly well (Lefebvre, 2018). Following an initial overland trip from Senegal to Niger via Mali, Burkina Faso and Benin, two respondents from Senegal were forced to stay in Agadez until they had an opportunity to travel across the Sahara Desert (through smugglers) and reach Libya. Once in Tripoli, the young men had to stay put and work on the local black market for another two months until they gathered enough financial resources to carry on their journey to Europe and make the even more dangerous and uncertain sea crossing to Italy. They were then picked up by an international ship on the Mediterranean and brought to a reception centre in Italy, where they remained undocumented for over seven months, deciding not to apply for asylum but rather to wait for an opportunity to carry on their journey towards a French-speaking European country where they felt their prospects could improve. Over the next ten months, and depending once again on informal networks, the two men eventually reached Belgium after a succession of small road travels and periods of immobility across Italy and France. At the time of the interview, the two young men were living in a highly precarious situation in Brussels as they were undocumented. This case therefore confirms the need to conceive mobility as an ever evolving and fragmented process, as well as to recognize the interplay between micro, meso and macro level factors in shaping migration aspirations and trajectories (Van Praag and Timmerman, 2019).

Conclusion

As further research is needed to obtain solid evidence on the complex interlinkages between environmental changes and the evermore *fragmented* nature of migrants' (im)mobilities, it is necessary to further test and apply the above-mentioned concepts in geographical contexts where linkages between environmental changes and migration flows – including South-South migration flows – are already well documented, shifting the focus away from Europe. In order to do so, a transnational, qualitative and longitudinal approach should be pursued in order to highlight potentially evolving perceptions of environmental factors' influence (or lack thereof) on migrants' journeys in space and time.

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