

Migration and Risks

Introduction

Risk-taking is inherent to migration. Leaving one's home has inevitably something of venturing into unknown territory. The home one leaves can be inhospitable, yet it is a familiar place. A host country can seem a heaven from afar, yet a newcomer with no full citizenship rights may find it a hard place. Economic theories place risk-taking at the centre of the decision to migrate. Whether they expect to earn a higher income on the condition that they find employment at destination¹ or their household follows a strategy of diversifying sources of income to reduce the probability of not earning a sufficient livelihood,² migrants – whether consciously or not – incorporate a risk calculation into their decisions to move. While in the first instance migrants seeking international protection obey a non-economic rationality, they also follow a risk-reduction strategy: as difficult as it might be, forced migration takes place once staying at home has become the worst choice.

International migrants are often the most resourceful in their populations of origin, in terms of both financial and human capital (particularly health and education). Those who are able to travel long distances are typically those with means, since journeys can often only be undertaken through the payment of steep fees to smugglers. Once migrants depart from home, however, the circumstances they face during the journeys in places of transit and at destination may affect their exposure to risk and even turn their initial advantage into a handicap. Migration is at the same time a response to and a source of risks. Chapters in this section review individual and contextual risk factors, defined respectively as characteristics of the person and characteristics of their environment, found to be associated with an increased likelihood of negative outcomes for the migrant. They provide the four following kinds of findings.

Firstly, migrants moving along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) can face specific risks because of the mere fact that they are on the move. Economic risks seem to come first. If the journey lasts longer than initially planned, migrants are at risk of destitution once their travel money dries up and they do not find a job in places of transit (Sattler and Cook, Chapter 11 of this volume). Social risks follow, as migrants without money cannot access basic services, starting with accommodation and health (Zenner and Wickramage, Chapter 20 of this volume), let alone education if they travel with their families. Moreover, people with no permits or visas to legally stay in the transit or destination countries risk arrest and detention with poor or no access to justice. Reports of migrants falling victims of rights violations of all kinds – abuse,

¹ Neoclassical economic theory of migration, developed, for example, by Todaro (1976).

² Theory developed by Stark and Bloom (1985).

exploitation, money extortion and robbery, forced labour, being abandoned in the desert or forced on a boat, attack, kidnapping, rape, and the list goes on until disappearance and death – are numerous and harrowing (Yuen, Chapter 13 of this volume; Nissling and Murphy-Teixidor, Chapter 14 of this volume).

But how many are victims of mistreatment in proportion to all migrants? In other words, what is the likelihood of these negative outcomes, or “risk” in the strict sense? The evidence gathered does not offer a definitive answer. In a context where representative samples cannot be constructed, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) and Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi) systems of observation often focus for operational reasons on particularly vulnerable groups who are overexposed to risks. Incidents recorded among these groups reveal the particular vulnerable situations they find themselves in, and call for action, but they do not necessarily reflect the overall situation of migrants.

Secondly, faced with the same situation, not all migrants are exposed to the same kinds and levels of risk. Individual factors also influence migrants’ vulnerability to risk. Intrinsic risk factors include, for example, sex, age and other characteristics, such as family status, country of origin, education and religion. Looking at migrants in Libya, men appear to be more exposed to risks of forced labour than women, on average, while women are more likely to suffer sexual violence and rape (Nissling and Murphy-Teixidor, Chapter 14 of this volume). Among those who arrived by sea to Italy, being young and male was also found to be more often associated with particularly high exposure to unpaid or forced labour, as well as to detention in Libya (Bartolini and Zakoska-Todorovska, Chapter 15 of this volume). The country of origin emerges as a risk factor in Libya, where migrants from East Africa are the most likely to suffer economic exploitation and money extortion (Nissling and Murphy-Teixidor, Chapter 14 of this volume). Among migrants travelling within West and Central Africa, being illiterate, divorced or widowed emerged as significant risk factors (Sattler and Cook, Chapter 11 of this volume); in other words, education and marriage would preserve travellers against hazards. The situation left behind is also susceptible to affecting migration and its related challenges. Among return female migrants assisted by IOM in Côte d’Ivoire, single mothers leaving their children behind in the home country were more likely to be vulnerable to various forms of exploitation during the journey and to abandon their migratory project. Moreover, back home after having abandoned difficult experiences abroad, these women lost the advantages they seemed to have before departing in terms of employment and income (Nanquette, Chapter 19 of this volume).

Thirdly, hazardous conditions under which many travel expose migrants to aggravated risks. Unsafe means of transportation and long waiting periods in difficult environments between successive steps of the journey can be extremely perilous. It was indeed found that the longer the journey, the higher the probability of experiencing serious incidents (Sattler and Cook, Chapter 11 of this volume). Due to their often undocumented status, migrants stay in limbo, where they hardly access any services, such as health care (Zenner and Wickramage, Chapter 20 of this volume). Perpetrators of violations are often those in charge of their victims’ travels – smugglers or simple facilitators according to situations and viewpoints – whose power over the migrants and knowledge of their personal situations place them in a position to mistreat them (Yuen, Chapter 13 of this volume). When resorting to smugglers, migrants expose themselves to uncontrolled agents operating outside the law. Meanwhile, smugglers play an ambivalent role. On one side, they provide migrants with support by organizing their journeys (at a high cost and high risk for the migrant); and, on the other, they are often perpetrators of abuse against the migrants alongside other actors, such as members of criminal networks, police or other migrants (Sanchez, Chapter 18 of this volume; Murphy-Teixidor, Bonfiglio and Leigh, Chapter 17 of this volume). Smugglers are often members of local communities in border areas, for whom smuggling migrants is a historically rooted, socially admitted, even respectable way to escape poverty (Sanchez, Chapter 18 of this volume). Arrangements between smugglers and migrants – such as payments in two halves, one before and the other after the completion of the journey – may increase migrants’ safety (Murphy-Teixidor, Bonfiglio and Leigh, Chapter 17 of this volume).

Fourthly, political factors create potentially acute contextual risks. Due to political instability, lawless zones have emerged across the Sahel, the Sahara and Libya, making the desert even more inhospitable than it is by nature. While no proper statistics of cases of disappearance and death in the desert exist, accounts of violence favoured by the lack of State control and rule of law are many (Black, Chapter 12 of this volume; Sattler and Cook, Chapter 11 of this volume; Bartolini and Zakoska-Todorovska, Chapter 15 of this volume). At the other end of the spectrum, State policies of tight border control in Europe, and increasingly in countries on the CMR, translate into serious dangers for migrants travelling across the Sahel and the Mediterranean Sea – the most lethal border in the world, based

on available evidence. Search and rescue activities at sea have been highly politicized. Search and rescue operations leading to disembarkation in Europe have been conducted by different actors in recent years, including merchant and fishing vessels, Italian and European security forces and humanitarian non-governmental organizations. They have played an important role in reducing the deadliness of sea crossings. The recent support provided by the European Union to the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, which bring rescued migrants back to the Libyan shore, is, however, highly problematic, as it exposes migrants to arbitrary detention and deportation (Cusumano and Villa, Chapter 16 of this volume).

The urgent need to minimize risks for migrants strongly emerges from chapters in this section. Knowing dangers is a necessary step to better combat them. This applies to migration stakeholders as well as to would-be migrants. On the one hand, State and non-State institutions dealing with migration must gain an accurate knowledge of the dangers: of what nature, in what places, by what perpetrators, with what modus operandi, and what likelihood in particular from an age and gender perspective? These are key questions to document in order to design effective protection measures. On the other hand, improving awareness of would-be migrants about the risks irregular migration across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea entail is necessary for them to make an informed choice, avoid exposure to dangers and be better prepared to deal with them.

Designing responses to “address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration” (Objective 7 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration) must be pursued in countries of West and North Africa, in particular action (b), to “provide migrants in a situation of vulnerability, regardless of their migration status, with necessary support at all stages of migration”; and action (c), to “address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women, girls and boys, which may include assistance, health care, psychological and other counselling services, as well as access to justice and effective remedies, especially in cases of sexual and gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation”. For this, evaluating and furthering programmes of prevention, care and assistance to migrants in the region is another indispensable step.

Finally, pursuing the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration’s Objective 8 to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants”, including “review[ing] the impacts of migration-related policies and laws to ensure that these do not raise or create the risk of migrants going missing”, is of the utmost relevance along the CMR.

— REFERENCES

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