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Reconceptualising international migration with a human insecurity perspective: macro, mezo and micro level conflicts

By

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Human Insecurity and Streams of Conflict for a Re-conceptualization of International Migration

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Abstract

Securitisation of international migration is now a widely accepted phenomenon. Human security or insecurity is an important aspect of this broader security concern. International migration raises security issues at different levels because it involves a multitude of agencies that often have conflicting interests. In this conceptual review, main areas and actors of migration associated conflict are discussed. The aim is to explore the possibility of developing a conflict-based model that will facilitate the understanding of contemporary international migration flows and the reasons, mechanisms and dynamics underpinning them. Different stages of migration bring out different sets of conflicting security interests. The concept of environment of insecurity is placed within this multilevel conflict model. This study aims to provide a new understanding of human security and migration nexus from a conflict perspective which is conducive to a comprehensive migration conceptualisation and viable policy solutions.

Keywords

Security; human insecurity; environment of insecurity; conflict; international migration

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Introduction

The 9/11 New York and 7/7 London acts of terrorism, along with other less prominent acts of terrorism, put state security at the forefront of debates on international migration. Even before this change, however, discussions on international migration often dealt with issues involving human security or insecurity—issues that have been and continue to be important in situations of forced and clandestine migration in particular. Human security and insecurity are complimentary in that they are intertwined with international migration. They are like different sides of the same security coin, but the latter is more likely to be a facilitating factor for those who move while the former is for those who stay. “The concept of human security emerged out of the recognition that individuals and communities emerged out of the recognition that individuals and communities’ security does not necessarily follow from the security of the state in which they are citizens” (Bilgin 2003: 213). Besides, we should add the potential differences between the security of individuals and the security of other states in transit or destination. A clear formulation of the concept of human security appeared in the United Nations Development Program’ 1994 Human Development Report, where the emphasis shifted towards ‘people’s security’ (UNDP, 1994 in Bilgin 2003:214). Amartya Sen, in one of the early attempts at conceptualizing human security, linked human security to threats to “the survival, daily life, and dignity of human beings and to strengthening the efforts to confront these threats” (2000: 1). Thus I argue that main motive in international migration can be formulated as seeking security; that is human security as the root cause. Thus we eliminate all unnecessary typologies which have been so far unhelpful in the endeavour of conceptualising the phenomenon. The threats to human security may come in many forms ranging from lack of job opportunities to inter-ethnic war or environmental hazards, all of which may channel into an exit option: emigration. However, in this paper, I would like to focus on the exploration of different layers of conflict rather than causes of migration. This is because the conflict does lead to change and vice a versa. Migration

movements therefore need to be understood in such a dynamic and constantly changing conflict environment.

Although the concept of human security is not yet fully developed, it has been frequently used in the literature. Formulations of human security often emphasize the welfare of ordinary people (Paris 2001). Thomas argues “that material sufficiency lies at the core of human security” and “the problems of poverty and deepening inequality are central concerns” (2001: 159). In their elaboration of the Index of Human Insecurity, Lonergan et al. underline that “human security has been endangered not only by military threats, but also of resource scarcity, rapid population growth, human rights abuses, and outbreaks of infectious diseases, environmental degradation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity” (2000: 1; also see Homer-Dixon 1994). The human insecurity concept proposed herein incorporates all of the above mentioned threats to security. Human insecurity is a new concept that may vary among different segments of the population. It is perceived subjectively by individuals (and/or households, communities and so on).

For growing numbers of people attempting to obtain a better life via cross-border migration, the recent militarization of border controls has elevated the risk to human security and raised the level of human insecurity. The process of international migration almost always involves a certain level of conflict. Conflicts at the point of origin, in transit and in destination facilitate international migration and affect the ways in which migration takes place (Sirkeci 2006). They also shape the nature and composition of networks involved in the migration process. Poverty in the third world and the widening welfare gap between developed and underdeveloped countries are significant factors motivating people to move on to better pastures, mostly in the Western world. Given that strong push factors are present in most migrant-sending countries (e.g., lack of employment opportunities, ethnic conflicts and wars, and frequent natural disasters); migration related conflict promises to remain a significant international problem well into the future.

The increased focus on security issues in current discussions of international migration is predictable given the myriad of world-wide injustices and inequalities that are, at least in part, responsible for generating what appears to be a rising tide of resentment among growing numbers of people in less privileged areas of the globe. From

my perspective, international migration is a search for security or an implication of human insecurity. Immediately after 9/11, Sassen (2001) said “we cannot hide behind our peace and prosperity”. The terrorist, as an individual, organisation, or nation-state, has appeared in a wide range of discourses following the 9/11. We have not developed a concept of migrant as terrorist but increasing domination of security discourses over international migration agenda, this may become a reality. Thus, such acts of terrorism can be seen as an extreme example of migrating human agency who challenges to the regulatory agency. At a certain level of analysis, acts of terrorism can be seen as a type of discourse between those that rule and those that see themselves as oppressed victims of an unjust system, between the haves and the have nots between the rich and poor (although, certainly not all terrorist are poor). With regard to the underlying discourse of terrorism, Sassen makes this point clear: “The attacks are a language of last resort: the oppressed and persecuted have used many languages to reach us so far...” (2001). In terms of international migration, the question arises as to whether or not we have entered an era characterized by migration-stimulated terrorism? At present, there is not hard evidence to answer this question with any degree of accuracy. It is clear, however, that international migration regimes are getting more militarised and therefore likely to cause human tragedies as seen in numerous counts of deaths and abuses recorded in borderlands.

With regard to the pros and cons of migration, no consensus exists among destination countries as different concerns are at stake. For some destination countries, immigration is seen as a cure to an aging population (e.g. European countries). To other destination countries, immigration is seen as a threat to limited resources (e.g. African countries hosting large influxes from neighbouring war zones). Hence, interests (particularly socioeconomic interests) between sending and receiving countries can and often do conflict. Typically the former struggles to retain the most qualified people and reduce unemployment levels while the latter try to receive limited numbers of skilful people. For individuals and households that are migrating as part of a survival strategy or strategic option (e.g., to escape economic and/or political pressures), disputes among states over immigration policy tend to ring hollow if they are heard at all.

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