

Conflict and Opportunistic Migration in the 21st Century. Challenges and way forward for Development Policy

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Abstract

Migration, like trade remains a divisive topic amongst academics, policy makers and constituents in many areas around the world. While there is notable reluctance at the international level to engage in serious debate on the issue of migration, there is a tacit consensus on 'sympathy' towards streams of migrants displaced as a result of conflicts around the world. Such 'sympathy' is however not without criticism, as many authors question the contribution of often nationalistic and shortsighted migration policy amongst other issues (like trade) to the causes of conflicts, and subsequently the root cause of 'forced migration'. When it does occur, debates on the advantages and disadvantages of migration often neglect the fundamental rights of the migrants, as they are often treated like mere pieces in a puzzle. The focus of this perspective study is therefore to examine a 'smaller stream' of migrants that move from conflict-stricken regions, not necessarily because they have been directly affected by conflict, but because conflicts provide opportunities for long-nursed migration plans to materialize. The paper zooms in on the ongoing Anglophone crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon as a case study, utilizing secondary data on asylum applications from the years 2021 to 2023 in the United States to show that early motivation, access to human and financial resources play an important role in determining the direction, route, and timing of migration. We contend that while this migration trend is unfortunate (it prevents authorities from capturing the real situation of those in actual need of assistance), it is a consequence of stringent migration policies in many host countries and the economic situation in home countries. We note that while this practice needs to be discouraged, the consequences on the global, national, and individual levels are not always negative. It therefore appeals to a more comprehensive migration reform at the national and international level, considering migration as an important tool for poverty alleviation in developing countries.

Key words: Migration, poverty alleviation, conflicts, and opportunism.

1 Introduction

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicates that there are over two hundred and eighty-one million migrants around the world in 2020. This number constituted about 3.6% of the world's population, and contributed about 647 billion USD in remittances to the global economy in 2022 (IOM, 2024).

Owing to the sheer number of people involved and the substantial contribution it makes to the global economy, migration has since the dawn of the new millennium been top of the policy issues governments and international organizations have to deal with. Migrant remittances and their potential for fostering development became the subject of increasing attention in the late 1990s, 'as the level of remittances from labor migrants started exceeding Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to some developing countries' (Sharma & Knio, 2011). Conflict remains one of the most consistent drivers of migration. We contend that while conflict triggers migration, some of the migrants (especially international migrants) in conflict situation have 'early motivation' (nursed the thought or ambitions of migrating) and use conflicts only as an opportunity to gain entry into destinations with very restrictive entry requirements for other types of migrants. The case study of Cameroon is used to substantiate this argument and drive our points home.

The first section of the paper conceptualizes the main drivers of migration, taking a closer look at both the predisposing and proximity drivers of migration. This is closely followed by discussions on the historical and actual relations between conflict and migration. This discussion stresses the importance of conflict as a driver for migration and lays the ground work for further discussions on the opportunistic migration in conflict situations. The paper uses the case study of Cameroon, a country that has been steeped in conflict for the past ten years with over six thousand five hundred (6500) casualties and over five hundred and eighty-four thousand (584.000) displaced people. The conflict has triggered an outflow of migrants towards other African countries, Europe, but most especially towards the United States through the 'Mexican Route' until recently when tightened immigration policies in the United States have caused a steep decline in the number of Cameroonians heading in that direction.

2 Drivers of Migration

Migration reflects the rational decision of millions of internal and international migrants to seek new opportunities (Chen et al., 1998; Kessides, 2006; Montgomery et al., 2003). Drivers of migration consist of forces that lead to both the inception of migration and the perpetuation of the movement. "To understand migration flows better, analysts could usefully distinguish between predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers" (Nicholas et al.,

2018). Drivers of migration can be economic, social, political or even climatic and could then be classed under one or a combination of predisposition, proximity, precipitation, and mediating circumstances.

According to Nicholas et al (2018), predisposing drivers are ‘manifest in structural disparities between migrants’ place of origin and place of destination, both being shaped by the global macro-political economy’. The pull of better educational infrastructure, better paying job opportunities, better working conditions and the presence of social amenities can be classed under predisposing drivers. Unequal outcomes of international trade and investment, environmental changes, urbanization and demographic transformation fall under the predisposing drivers. This category of drivers can therefore be economic disparities (between territories of origin and destination comprise differences in earning, livelihoods and standards of living), political disparities (prevalence of conflict, persecution and human rights abuses), environmental disparities (presence or absence of resources, fertility of soil, water availability) and geographical factors (proximity to borders and desired destination). Nicholas et al also discuss what they refer to as the proximate drivers. These include economic or business slumps, worsening security, human rights violations, and displacement due to environmental degeneration in places of origin, and economic booms, new employment opportunities in places of destination. There is some overlap between predisposing and proximate drivers, and both sets of drivers can be likened to what was traditionally referred to as ‘pull’ factors in migration literature.

Precipitating drivers actually trigger departure, as individuals and households take decisions to move or stay put (Nicholas et al., 2018). Such drivers may include sudden economic crisis, drastic rise in unemployment, factory closure, a collapse in farm prices, persecution, and escalation of conflict, massacre, outbreak of war, invasion, or outbreak of diseases. Precipitating drivers can also include new employment opportunities, temporary relaxation of immigration controls. Mediating drivers can facilitate migration (presence of quality of transport and communication, resources needed for journey and transit), constrain migration (absence of infrastructure, resources to embark on journey). Migrant networks encompassing source, transit, and destination countries, as well as the burgeoning smuggling industry may also play an important mediating role (Bakewell et al., 2016).

Masood and Peter (2017) attempt an explanation of drivers of migration using Neo-classical macroeconomic and microeconomic theories. To them, migration happens as a result of a process of economic development making reference to the work of Harris and Todaro (1970) and wage differences. Migration to individuals in these circumstances is a conscious choice aimed at maximizing their income, and in so doing reduce the ratio of labor to capital in countries of origin and contributing to remittances and foreign direct investment.

While this paper builds on the foundation of this elaborate categorization of the drivers of migration, it contends that there is a deep overlap in the drivers of migration and as such makes the understanding of the motivation, timing, and patterns of migration a complex issue. While conflict is classified under the precipitating drivers, the presence of 'Early motivation' within the context of migration in conflict situation indicates to the intervention of some predisposing drivers especially for international migrants. As we shall see in the next section, international migration, even for asylum seekers to areas like North America, the UK, and Europe require extensive resources both financial, human, and social that point to careful preparation. This is a luxury that most people directly affected by conflict cannot afford.

3 Conflict and Migration

Analyses on forced migration find significant effects of conflict and violence on the number of asylum seekers and refugees (see Czaika & Hobolth 2014, Hatton 2009; Moore & Shellman 2007). This relation is circular because there is evidence that migration increases tensions and conflict, especially over international borders (Burrows & Kinney, 2016). O'Malley (2018) details a long history of conflicts dating back to the Homo sapiens surrounding resources, survival, and the control of territory that have triggered migration. More recently in the twenty first century, thousands of refugees continue to use treacherous and life-threatening routes to flee countries caught in conflict like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cameroon, and other conflict spots around the world. While 21st century conflicts are typically not inter-state in nature (not usually nation-states against one another), there has been a proliferation of intra-state conflicts waged by warlords, governments against their own citizens, minorities within nation states demanding self-determination, authoritarian regimes using heavy handed responses to increasing demands for economic and political justice by their

constituents. These conflicts are of varying scale with devastating consequences on the lives and properties of citizens. For casualties in conflicts, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the ratio of combatants to civilians killed in war was 8:1 meaning eight combatants for every civilian. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the figures were reversed; the ration now stands at 1:8 meaning eight civilians were killed for every combatant (O'Malley, 2018). There are therefore more civilians killed by those bearing arms. The number of refugees estimated for all of Africa at the end of 2016 was 5.1 million (O'Malley, 2018). This numbers and the numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) keeps increasing as conflicts in many parts of Africa escalate. From January to July 2024, the IOM reports that 85,085 people fleeing conflicts arrived Europe, 79,906 by sea and 5,179 by land.

There is no doubt that conflict is an important driver of migration both historically and in more recent times. It is however, very crucial to note that the decision to migrate in some cases may originate from the causes of conflicts and not necessary from the onset of the conflict or when the conflict escalates. Schon (2018) uses data from over 170 structured interviews with Syrian refugees in Turkey to establish that civilians who have 'wasta' - an advantaged social position resulting from some combination of money and connections- have the opportunity to migrate safely. Schon also finds that civilians who did not witness violence (early motivation) and had 'wasta' left their homes approximately one and a half year earlier, on average (Schon, 2018). Van Hear (2004) establishes the importance of class (endowments of different forms of capital-economic, social, cultural, symbolic and human) significantly impact the forms, patterns, and impact of migration, and the influence population abroad can exert on countries of origin. The establishment of an 'increasingly stringent migration regime' has meant that the cost of migration to escape conflicts has drastically increased in the past decade. Those with money can take advantage of time-space compression. Those who are uprooted from their homes and forced to flee their country with few resources experience migration in a very different way (Hyndman, 2000).

Stricter immigration legislation in many host countries (northern hemisphere) has increased the cost of migration significantly. The UK for instance, introduced the Carriers' Liability Act in the later part of the 1980s, thus discouraging many asylum seekers from landing in UK ports and forcing them to

alternate European destination. This also left many migrants with little alternative than to turn to smugglers and traffickers who charged significantly higher fees because of the increase demand of their services. Van Hear (2004) uses the examples of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and Somalia to establish the importance of economic and human resources to the choice of destination for asylum, with richer people leaving for North America and Europe and those without means being displaced to neighboring countries or sometimes within the country. The increase in cost do not take into consideration poor decision making in asylum cases across Europe (often referred to as the 'asylum lottery' because of the inconsistency in the reasons for recognition or denial of asylum applications across European countries) (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2018).

4 Case Study of Cameroon

Cameroon is caught in a complex intrastate conflict that has escalated since 2016. Lawyers and teachers in the minority English speaking part of Cameroon (North West and South West Regions) began strike action in 2016 demanding the independence of the Anglophone educational and judicial sub-systems. According to Pelican (2013) English speaking Cameroonians have always claimed historical and contemporary marginalization, a situation which to many has led to limited opportunities for social mobility. The absence of a buoyant industrial sector in the anglophone region to absorb the thousands of graduates from educational establishments fuel the flames of discontent in these regions. Heavy-handed responds from the government to the initial strike actions subsequently resulted in an armed conflict that has since engulfed the country for over nine years now. The situation has shaped the consciousness of youths in the Anglophone regions and influenced their conceptualization of advantages and disadvantages of life abroad on the bases of experiences imparted on them by migrant family and friends. The conflict has also resulted in untold loss both in human lives and property. Hundreds of thousands of Cameroonians have been displaced to other parts of the country (sometimes the French speaking cities nearby) while others have left for neighboring countries like Nigeria. According to the International Crisis Group (2024), about six thousand five hundred (6500) lives have been lost, five hundred and eighty-four thousand (584.000) people displaced with some seventy-three thousand

(73.000) refugees currently in Nigeria. There has also been a stream of international migrants, most heading towards Europe, the UK and North America from Cameroon.

Much in the context of the discussions above, a portion of the asylum seekers from Cameroon have not been directly affected by the ongoing conflicts. Early motivation, or opportunism has been the main drivers of a substantial part of the migration associated with this conflict. Early motivation, and access to financial and human resources have naturally determined the timing, route and destination of some of those fleeing the country.

5 Early Motivation

In 2024, the employment or the employment-to-population ratio in Cameroon for those fifteen years and above stood at 62.9%. Interestingly, 86.6% of jobs were in the informal sector with the labor force participation rate about 65.3% according to the National Institute for statistics. Interestingly, even the informal sector is plagued with problems, the country consistently performs poorly in major business environment indicators like the 'Ease of Doing Business Report', and the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) published yearly by Transparency International. A combination of these factors and the attractiveness of wages and other working conditions in receiving countries has always been a major factor in the choice to migrate for most Cameroonians. Hatton & Williamson (2003) contend that one of the main reasons for migration is the large wage gap between sending and receiving countries. This bleak picture both in the formal and informal sectors of the economy of Cameroon substantiates our claims of early motivation for a significant portion of those leaving the country.

6 Access to Financial and Human Resources

Olwig (2001) emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, and historical ties on migration. Like many other authors, he places importance on family ties and networks in determining the direction, route and timing of migration decisions. Because of strong family ties, a lot of extended family members provide information, financial support and networks to facilitate the migration of family members from home. Fleischer (2007) argues that extended family systems and strong kin and lineage relations remain important in most

regions in Cameroon since they provide a sense of belonging, solidarity, and protection. It is not uncommon to find a Cameroonian referring to another Cameroonian from the same town or village as 'brother or sister' irrespective of the fact that there are no close family ties amongst them. These strong family systems and ties also come with a feeling of responsibility, expectations, and obligations, often towards not only members of the nuclear family but to the extended family, tribe or clan (Tiemoko 2004). These factors along with the massive importance placed on marriage (most communities prefer sons and daughters to marry from the same tribe or other nearby communities) is at the root of the increasing figures of follow-to-join asylee numbers.

Most migrants from Cameroon are often young, educated, energetic and ambitious. Interestingly, while unemployment and underemployment remain relatively high in the country, many young people with formal employment even in the public sector choose to leave the country. According to Uchenna & Pongou (2012), the highly educated constitute a significant portion of Cameroonians who venture beyond Africa. In 2005, Cameroonian migrants in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries numbered 57,050 and 42.3 per cent of these were thought to be highly skilled (Dumont & Lemaitre, 2005). Most of these highly skilled are doctors and academics. Their education provides them with the qualification and financial resources necessary to make migration possible. This situation has forced the Cameroonian government to take drastic measures to halt the exodus of employees in the public sectors including placing restrictions on the exit of government teachers at ports of exit.

The main argument of this work (early motivation, and access to financial and human resources have naturally determined the timing, route and destination of some of those fleeing Cameroon) is backed by a closer look at the follow-to-join asylee travel statistics to the United States from Cameroon (the United States has been the preferred destination of most migrants fleeing the conflict in Cameroon recently because of language ties and the US commitment to the protection of human rights). The assumption is that people directly affected by the conflict would usually leave as a family, and not some members of the family fleeing and subsequently inviting others.

The follow-to-join asylee travel documents issued by country of Nationality for the 2021, 2022, and 2023 fiscal years indicate that:

- In 2021, a total of 2.290 documents were issued by the US Office of Homeland Security. Of this number, 290 were from Cameroon, representing a percentage of 12.7%
- In 2022, the number of documents issued to Cameroonians rose to 360, representing 4.2 % of the 8.580 documents issued.
- In 2023, the number of documents issued to Cameroonians again rose to 900, representing 6.5% of the 13.930 documents issued (Office of Homeland Security, 2023).

These statistics indicate a noticeable increase in the number of ‘follow-to join’ asylee documents issued to Cameroonians ‘escaping’ the Anglophone crisis that has engulfed the country for the past nine years. The availability of resources, a huge motivation to travel and the opportunity presented by the ongoing conflict in the country cannot be underestimated, especially given the frequent route often taken by these migrants (the Mexican route).

7 Conclusion

This paper highlights the sensitive but important nature of the debate around policies around migration; notably the drivers of migration and the intricate link between conflict and migration. Increasingly stringent migration policies in the usual ‘host countries’ (the United States and Europe) have hardly deterred the stream of migrants fleeing conflict, those in search of better opportunities, and those who simply ‘ride the tide of conflict’ to gain access to countries that would otherwise not be open to them. Some Cameroonians, like other migrants from Africa and other parts of the world have capitalized on early motivation, access to financial and human resources to time their departure to Europe and the US at a time the country is engulfed in a protracted conflict. The relaxation of strict restrictions on migrants’ admittance and a more coordinated migrant policy among western countries will certainly result in a drop in the number of follow-to-join asylee document applications in the United States and Europe. Further research can also focus on the individual motivations of asylum seekers based on their choice of migration routes and preferred landing destinations.

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