

Why the Migrant ‘Crisis’ is an Opportunity: Remittances, Aid and Global Responsibility

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Abstract: Remittances are now more than three times larger than aid flows to countries in the global South and constitute a rapidly growing source of development finance. Yet barriers to both entry and the right to work within Northern countries mean that their full potential is not being realised, with refugees and migrants from many Southern countries meeting significant blockages in their efforts to build new lives and livelihoods in their new homes. In this Viewpoint, I argue that we, as development educators, need to challenge and question the inconsistencies and hypocrisy underpinning national and international attitudes and policies which purport to assist Southern people through aid programmes, yet restrict these same people’s agency to seek employment elsewhere and assist their home communities directly. If handled justly and more openly, the so-called migrant ‘crisis’ represents an opportunity to move away from patronising charity stereotypes which perpetuate Northern ‘saviour complexes’ to more equitable, economically sustainable relationships North and South.

Key words: Overseas Development Aid; Sustainable Development Goals; Remittances; Migration; Refugees; Direct Provision; Burundi.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in the level of global remittances to the global South, from \$123 billion in 2000, to \$351 billion in 2012 (OECD, 2014: 123), to a record \$529 billion in 2018 (World Bank, 2019a: 1). By 2024, the World Bank estimates that remittances will be larger than aid and foreign direct investment combined, constituting the largest source of development finance for Southern countries, surpassing 25 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for some. As the Bank notes, ‘Remittances are on track to become the most important game in town when it comes to financing development’ (Barne and Pilea, 2019). While certainly not a panacea for poverty reduction and global

justice, remittances can and are assisting individuals and communities in real, tangible ways. Yet, as political sensitivities in the global North heighten over immigration, their full potential is not being realised.

At the same time, aid to the global South is falling. It fell by 3 percent last year, with humanitarian aid falling by 8 percent (OECD, 2019a). Yet the development sector remains focused on aid as a seemingly sole source of development finance, even though other sources are growing. In this Viewpoint, I argue that we, as development educators, need to challenge and question the inconsistencies and hypocrisy underpinning national and international attitudes and policies which purport to assist Southern people through aid programmes, yet restrict these same people's agency to seek employment elsewhere and assist their home communities directly. As the Head of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) recently noted, we live in 'an age of egotism' in the global North which is dominated by 'me first, we first, our country first policies and closing minds' (*The Irish Times*, 2019). The framing of the European migrant 'crisis' is an excellent example of such a 'me first, we first' attitude. The 'crisis' is repeatedly presented as a crisis for Europe although, from the horrific and harrowing stories of migrants themselves, it is clear that the real crises are in their own homes and communities. If handled justly and more openly, the so-called migrant 'crisis' offers a real opportunity to shift the global economic and political balance and to move towards more equitable, economically sustainable relationships North and South. I develop my argument as follows.

In the next section, while acknowledging the important gains of international aid in specific, targeted areas, I focus in particular on its limitations and shortcomings, both in the global South and, most particularly in the global North with respect to Southern agency and choice. I then go on to examine the usefulness of remittances as a complementary source of finance, focusing in particular on Ireland's poor record in this regard. I challenge development educators to look beyond the aid model and to critically engage with the inconsistencies and hypocrisy underpinning national and international attitudes and policies with respect to migration and remittances. In the final section, I take the case of Burundi, a largely neglected country in Central Africa whose people have experienced decades of displacement and re-displacement. The Burundi

case exemplifies the hypocrisy of the global system in relation to aid and migration in three respects – the failure of aid to address the root causes of internal conflict (while publicly declaring ‘success’); an abdication of global responsibility in the context of the ensuing refugee crisis; and the attendant persistence of poverty and insecurity as Burundians are denied access to employment opportunities in the global North. I conclude by arguing that the days of white saviours are over, and that the global North has a responsibility to move to a more open and equitable approach to migrants and asylum seekers. For our part, we, as development educators, need to critically engage with wider debates on the limitations of the international aid model, raising questions and challenging the inconsistencies and hypocrisy in the face of alternative models, including migration and remittances.

Aid, agency and choice

Much energy and resources have been expended within the development sector in lobbying and advocating for the 0.7 percent of Gross National Income (GNI) target as agreed within the United Nations in 1970. Yet, despite targeted gains in specific areas, the broader limitations of aid as a means towards global development and justice have been known for some time (see, for example de Haan, 2009; Hunt, 2012). Aid can contribute to some people’s livelihoods, but it cannot provide jobs for all. It can assist in the development and provision of health and education services in certain instances, but it cannot support and sustain effective and accessible national systems. It can promote good governance, but it cannot democratically hold governments to account. It can assist in rebuilding communities and societies following humanitarian disasters and/or conflict, but it cannot address all their root causes. Crucially, as the last ten years have shown us, it cannot be relied on to be sustained in times of economic downturn. Indeed, in a context where aid inflows lag far behind financial outflows, there is little aid can do to stem the outflow of wealth and exploitation of the global South. Although, in 2015, African countries received around \$19 billion in aid, over three times that much (\$68 billion) was taken out in capital flight, mainly by multinational companies deliberately misreporting the value of their imports or exports to reduce tax (Honest Accounts, 2017: 2).

As we also now know, although well-meaning, when misplaced or poorly implemented, aid can also do damage. It can bankroll strong dictators

and it can fuel corruption (Moyo, 2009). It can exacerbate inequalities between and within communities (de Haan, 2009: 106). And, when reverting to a 'one-size-fits-all' hierarchical model of development, it can ultimately fail to identify or address the real underlying issues, resulting in growing poverty, inequality, marginalisation, insecurity and, in many cases, violence (Easterly, 2006). Indeed, the jury is still out on whether aid can or does assist in reducing poverty and inequalities in the global South. While poverty and inequality has been decreasing in some parts of the world, in others – notably in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) – it has grown. According to a recent World Bank report, the number of people living in poverty (defined as less than \$1.90 per day at 2011 levels) in the SSA region grew from 278 million in 1990 to 413 million in 2015 (World Bank, 2018). When the definition is widened to include education, access to basic utilities, healthcare and security, this level rises even further.

Aid, or more specifically, the international aid community, also impacts at a less tangible, relational level in a manner which can be, and indeed often is, quite damaging and demeaning to individuals, communities and states of the global South (Escobar, 1995). The international aid community's tenacious adherence to modernist ideas of linearity in the trajectory from 'undeveloped' to 'developing' to 'developed', coupled with its myopic understanding of the global, structural causes of underdevelopment fuels the stubborn persistence of a charity approach to global inequality (see for example Simpson's findings on perceptions among educators at primary and secondary level in the UK (Simpson, 2017)). There are three main consequences to this. First, obstacles to development and equality are identified as internal – characteristics of 'undeveloped' or, more optimistically, 'developing' countries themselves, as opposed to broader structural constraints, or indeed, failures or shortcomings on the part of the international aid community and its interventions. The South is the problem, not the North. Second, the agency of Southern actors (state and civil society) in addressing these obstacles is largely negated as Southern actors are generally represented as constituting their principal architects. Third and related, it therefore falls to Northern actors and institutions – i.e. the international community – to intervene and assist, thus laying the foundation and rationale for the aid industry. The language of the aid community is replete with such ideology. To take an example, in a commentary on the World Bank's recent poverty report cited above, Nirav

Patel of the Brookings Institute notes ‘the remarkable progress the world has achieved toward ending extreme poverty’ (Patel, 2018: 20 - emphasis added), yet goes on to speak of ‘sub-Saharan Africa’s much slower fight against poverty’. Successes are attributed to the international community, while failures are the global South’s alone. While development education plays an important role in challenging these framings and stereotypes, evidence suggests that more needs to be done (Oberman and Waldron, 2017). This Northern saviour complex is not just damaging and demeaning to Southern actors and communities, it also masks the shortcomings and errors of Northern actors and institutions. This, in turn, negates their complicity in the production and reproduction of global inequality, thereby negating their responsibilities to address it.

In short, aid, while certainly beneficial in targeted areas, is not without its problems. Yet it is important to note that it is not the only show in town. At the same time as aid flows dwindle and stagnate, remittances have been increasing at a rapid rate. The World Bank estimates that there are now 270 million migrants working around the world who will send a combined \$698 billion back home in 2019 (World Bank, 2019a). This is over three times the volume of total aid flows in the same year. Yet, as we will see below, there is potential for much more if Northern countries move beyond a ‘me first’ attitude and embrace their global responsibilities and obligations.

Migration, remittances and glass ceilings

The World Bank reports that the worldwide number of international migrants has been increasing steadily from a level of 18 million in 2010 to 270 million in 2019 (2019a: 9). Included in these figures are asylum seekers and refugees. By mid-2018, the global stock of refugees recorded by the UNHCR reached 20.2 million (Ibid). However, despite European proclamations of a migration ‘crisis’, countries in the global South have historically and continue to host by far the largest share of refugees. This was around 85 percent of the global total in 2017 (UNHCR, 2018). Meanwhile, the approval rate for asylum applications in the European Union (EU) has been falling – from 46 percent in 2017 to 37 percent in 2018. With a total stock of over 870,000 pending asylum applications at the

end of 2018 and also considering detected undocumented economic migrants, the World Bank (2019a: 11) estimates that the number of migrants refused entry into EU countries in 2018 at over 6 million. The growing anti-immigration sentiment in many European countries is clearly having an influence. Although in December 2018, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly voted to formally adopt a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration as a step toward managing migration in a more humane and orderly manner, the withdrawal of several countries (mostly from within the EU) from this is indicative of heightened political sensitivities toward immigration (Desmond, 2018).

Migrant remittances play an important role in development in many Southern countries, amounting to over 25 percent of some country's annual GDP (for example, Haiti, Nepal, Tonga and Tajikistan) (World Bank, 2019a: 3). As well as assisting families and communities to purchase necessities such as food, clothing and housing, these direct flows can also help in the development of livelihoods and businesses. Yet remittances to some of the world's poorest countries, notably those in SSA, are much lower. At the high end, remittances to some SSA countries amount to between 7 and 15 percent of GDP (the top five are: The Gambia at 15.3 per cent of GDP; Liberia at 12 percent; Senegal at 9.1 per cent; Ghana at 7.3 percent; and Nigeria 6.1 at percent) (World Bank, 2019a: 23). However, some of the continent's poorest countries such as Burundi receive less than 1 per cent of GDP, as the vast majority of Burundian migrants live in neighbouring countries where employment opportunities are limited (World Bank, 2019b).

Despite its positive reputation for its celebrated aid programme and international peacekeeping operations abroad, Ireland's welcome for migrants and asylum seekers at home leaves a lot to be desired. A survey of over 1,000 migrants in 2006 found that 32 percent of work permit holders have experienced racist harassment at work, while 21 percent of those entitled to work reported discrimination in accessing employment. This is most common among Africans. 18 percent of those who had contact with immigration services reported that they were badly treated (ESRI, 2006). Ireland's treatment of migrants seeking asylum has long been a source of justifiable criticism. An analysis of UNHCR (2019a) data shows that Ireland ranks poorly among European nations for its treatment

of asylum-seekers over the last seven years in several respects. Ireland has recognised fewer asylum claims than many smaller or similar sized countries since 2012 and ranks 55th out of 183 countries overall, recognising asylum claims in 677 cases since 2012.

Crucially, just 3 percent of asylum applications have been recognised over this period; 21 percent have been rejected; and a staggering 76 percent of applicants have either been left waiting or their cases have been closed, without either recognition or rejection. While waiting, under the country's much criticised system of Direct Provision, (see IHREC, 2014 and NASC, 2019 for comprehensive critiques of Direct Provision), asylum seekers receive just €29.80 a week for children and €38.80 for adults. No travel pass is provided, and the state provides no investment in early legal advice. A Working Group Report from the Irish Refugee Council (IRC, 2015) which interviewed people living within Ireland's asylum process found that this length of time left in limbo waiting to hear the outcome constitutes the biggest stress for many. Specific stresses cited by asylum seekers in this regard include: the uncertainty; the lack of personal autonomy over the most basic aspects of their lives – cooking, going to the shops, cleaning; the lack of privacy within Direct Provision accommodation, and the challenges of sharing with strangers; boredom and isolation; and the loss of employment skills and the creation of dependency. In a recent parliamentary committee debate on Direct Provision, it was reported that these conditions have deteriorated further (Oireachtas, 2019). Moreover, although a work permit was introduced in 2018 following a Supreme Court ruling, this is valid for just 6 months and comes with many restrictions which act as a major disincentive for potential employers. Consequently, as of May 2018, of the 1,500 asylum seekers who were granted permits, just 350 were able to find work (Ibid).

Thus, while displaying a generosity and willingness to assist people from the global South once they stay at home, Ireland, like many other Northern countries, proves far less magnanimous towards migrants taking the difficult and sometimes necessary choice to leave and assist their countries themselves. A glass ceiling exists and, as political sensitivities toward immigration heighten, the ceiling is turning to concrete. This fundamental hypocrisy in relation to aid, migration and asylum seekers is exemplified in the case of Burundi discussed below.

Burundi: A case of global hypocrisy

Burundi is a small landlocked country in Central Africa. With a per capita GNI of just US\$702 and the Human Development Index ranking of 185 (out of 189 countries), it ranks as one of the poorest countries in the world (UNDP, 2018). Since attaining independence from Belgium in 1962, the country has been plagued by internal conflict and violence as different political actors mobilise for power and control over the country's resources. This has resulted in successive waves of displacement and re-displacement, the most recent of which has been taking place over the last four years since the sitting president's controversial decision to seek a third term in office in 2015 which was deemed unconstitutional by his political opponents.

Burundi exemplifies the hypocrisy of the global North in relation to aid and migration in three respects. First, aid has largely failed Burundi. This is because the international aid community, in conjunction with local actors, failed to address the root causes of internal conflict. Although peace negotiations, held in Arusha, Tanzania, were widely declared a 'success' (see Campbell, 2015), ongoing reports of political intimidation in the years that followed (Gaynor, 2014), and the overt insecurity and violence that has characterised the last four years (Human Rights Watch, 2019; UNHCR, 2019b), indicate a profound failure in aid efforts from 2000 forward. According to analysts, this failure was due to the aid community's focus on high level politics while ignoring local concerns (Curtis, 2013; Gaynor, 2014); underfunding and poor implementation of the security sector reform process (Grauvogel, 2016); and a lack of support for returning refugees (Purdeková, 2016). As in the case of neighbouring Rwanda (see Reyntjens, 2008; Beswick, 2010; Gaynor, 2016), the international community's need for a success story dominated international narratives and strategy around the Burundian process from 2000 forward. As Campbell (cited in Grauvogel, 2016: 8) notes: 'in the wake of the "unexpected success of Arusha", the international community, and especially Western donors, ignored the negative patterns that became visible from 2006 onwards'.

Second, although partially responsible for the current crisis, the global North is unwilling to shoulder its proportion of the burden. Although Burundi ranks as one of the poorest countries in the world, Burundian migrants are largely

denied access to employment opportunities in the global North. During the last four years, over 400,000 people have fled the country. Over half have been welcomed in the neighbouring country of Tanzania, while Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Uganda have hosted 72,612, 45,447 and 42,334 respectively (UNHCR, 2019c). International migration figures are significantly lower, registering in the hundreds per annum in contrast to regional figures. Canada, the United States, Belgium and France are the main Northern recipient countries. Ireland has accepted no Burundian refugees since 2000 (OECD, 2019b). Refugees in Tanzania are not allowed to work (Lukunka, 2011), and employment opportunities in other neighbouring countries are limited. Thus, opportunities to directly assist families and communities at home through remittances are minimal. This explains why Burundi's remittances account for less than 1 percent of its GDP (World Bank, 2019b).

Third, the global North appears unwilling to assist both internally displaced people and migrants and refugees in Burundi's neighbouring countries. According to the UNHCR, the Burundian refugee crisis was the least funded internationally in 2018. In 2019, there has been a shortfall of 78 percent in the required funding, with just US\$64 million of the \$293 million required secured (UNHCR, 2019d). This acute shortfall in international support means that regional borders are now closing and options to leave are becoming more and more difficult. Refugees are no longer being granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis in Tanzania, Uganda, and the DRC (UNHCR, 2019c). Meanwhile, for those living in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, conditions are very poor. Widespread overcrowding and cholera are reported. More recently, the situation of refugees in Tanzanian camps has worsened considerably with the announcement of forced repatriation after 1 October 2019. The Tanzanian government states that, in the face of broken promises of funding and support from the international community, it can no longer afford to host refugees (Ross, 2019). While both the Tanzanian and Burundian governments claim that conditions in Burundi have now stabilised, refugees fear otherwise. As one anonymous refugee, speaking to the BBC suggested, 'It's very unfortunate. What have the international community or Tanzania done to stop Nkurunziza's government from persecuting people? There are killings, abductions and dead bodies found later. They are pushing us back to be killed' (Ibid).

As a political stalemate continues between regional governments and international agencies over who is responsible and who should take action, displaced households are left in limbo, living in deplorable conditions and under a threat of forced repatriation. This international failure to adequately respond to the political and humanitarian crisis is both irresponsible and untenable given the abject failure of internationally sanctioned, and internationally acclaimed, efforts at aid and peacebuilding in Burundi. The Burundi case exemplifies the global North's fundamental hypocrisy in relation to aid, migration and asylum seekers.

Conclusion

There will always be a place for aid in global efforts to secure greater equality and justice. Yet its limitations and, where applicable, the damage caused by inappropriate (although often well meaning) initiatives needs to be publicly acknowledged. The agency and capacity of Southern actors to actively engage in their own and their country's development also needs to be acknowledged and supported. The days of the white saviour are over. Complementary mechanisms of development finance need to be explored. Yet the development sector largely chooses to ignore them. For example, while Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) refers to policies for 'safe and orderly migration', nothing is said about opening borders and increasing employment opportunities in the global North so that migrants can help themselves and their families (UN, 2019: 13). While Goal 17 makes references to remittances as a support in implementing the SDGs, no link is made to the barriers and obstacles facing migrants in the global North (UN, 2019: 56). Indeed, the wider shortcomings of the SDGs in addressing global poverty and inequality are discussed elsewhere in this issue (McCloskey, 2019).

As aid flows dwindle and stagnate, and as the international community chooses to ignore its responsibilities and obligations at home towards particular communities and people, we, as development educators, need to challenge and question the inconsistencies and hypocrisy underpinning aid and migration attitudes and policies. We need to be at the forefront in calls for complementary and alternative mechanisms of development finance which afford greater agency

and support to Southern people seeking employment and livelihoods elsewhere. This means overtly challenging the incipient racism and ‘me-first-ism’ which permeates public discourse and attitudes towards migrants. Opening our borders and labour markets to incoming migrants provides one mechanism which can go some way towards redressing the global imbalance of power and resources.

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