

SUMMARY

Context

Environmental changes are increasingly part of migration journeys, and count amongst the factors that call into question the distinction made between migrants and refugees. Additionally, in the international negotiations on climate change, migration is increasingly perceived as a possible adaptation strategy to the impacts of climate change. But only few studies exist on how migration could actually work for adaptation, and none of them address migration in Belgium.

Objectives

MIGRADAPT aims to fill this gap by analysing how migration can support the adaptation and resilience of communities, building on its appraisal of the migration-environment nexus in Belgium. To achieve this goal, the project is divided into two parts. First, MIGRADAPT seeks to understand the role of environmental disruptions as drivers for migration to Belgium. The guiding research questions include: How do migrants perceive the environment to have influenced their migration journey? To what extent has the environment impacted upon the other drivers of migration? How do they perceive current environmental disruption in their countries of origin? Second, MIGRADAPT seeks to understand the effects and perceived effects of migration on the adaptation of the communities of origin. This is a key innovation of the project as it considers the outcomes of migration for the communities of origin rather than just for the migrants themselves. The key research question guiding this analysis is: How (under which conditions) can migration to Belgium support the adaptation of communities affected by environmental changes?

Methodology

MIGRADAPT engages in a transnational, multi-sited primary data collection process through qualitative in-depth interviews. Three countries of origin have been selected for this study – Morocco (Tangiers and Tinghir), Senegal (Dakar and several villages in the Futa Toro region) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Kinshasa and Goma), based on existing migration flows between these countries and Belgium, their environmental profile, and their development partnerships with Belgium.

Results

This research finds and confirms that perceptions of environmental changes are – across a multiplicity of contexts – extremely diverse and localized, often depending on various factors such as one’s level of educational attainment, main occupation (and level of reliance upon natural resources), gender, age, specific vulnerabilities, or existing migration networks. Perceptions of a degraded environment (usually thought to have been worsened by human activity) affected respondents’ migration aspirations and im/mobility patterns, by impacting (usually indirectly) their livelihoods and socio-economic conditions. Despite this general awareness about environmental changes and how it had impacted their areas of origin, interviewed migrants very rarely identified adverse weather shocks or gradual changes as a major reason for their own migration. Instead, their (internal and international) move appeared embedded within wider and longer-running trends and ‘cultures of migration’ (e.g. labour migration, family reunification, student migration). Although transnational practices between migrants and non-migrants (e.g. regular visits, communication activities,

material transfers – such as financial remittances –, as well as social and political remittances) were particularly intense and widespread across the different samples, households without unequal access to migration networks were often less able to cope with external shocks, be they social, economic and/or environmental. The diaspora was indeed identified as key development and adaptation actor, mainly through the sending of financial remittances, but also through the importation of skills and knowledge or the setting up of collective initiatives (both by migrants and returnees). Due to various reasons (e.g. a lack of technical or financial capacities, of appeal, or of expressed needs), these individual and collective contributions were however rarely specifically intended to improve populations' adaptation to environmental changes, but rather focused on contributing to wider development efforts and/or improving the socio-economic conditions of a household or a given community.

Recommendations

The different findings arising from this research gave way to a range of policy recommendations that are relevant to the fields of climate change adaptation, development, and migration. Policy makers should for instance support measures that address human-induced environmental changes (desertification, overfishing, poor urban governance, waste management, disaster risk reduction) and seek to raise local populations' awareness on the adverse effects of climate change (to bridge the existing gap between populations that are unequally affected by adverse environmental changes). More generally, as social, political, economic, environmental and demographic drivers of migration constantly interact with one another, policy makers should actively consider such multi-causality and complexity in their migration-related policies or programmes, rather than conceiving the relationship between environmental changes and human mobility as a linear one. Policy makers should also co-develop projects with diaspora members in the fields of climate change adaptation, agricultural resilience and socio-economic development. Investments and incentives should be put in place to support migrants and non-migrants' financial and technical capacity to initiate or participate in small-scale and larger-scale projects in areas of origin affected by environmental changes.

Conclusions

Through qualitative fieldwork conducted in selected sites in Senegal, Morocco, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Belgium, this research demonstrates that although environmental changes are rarely identified as a primary driver of human mobility, migrants and non-migrants often perceive them to affect their migration aspirations, decisions, trajectories and transnational practices (including with regards to adaptation to environmental changes and related socio-economic impacts), albeit in a localized, context-specific and non-linear manner. This study further advocates for the increased mainstreaming of the environmental component of migration into development and adaptation policies and programmes through a series of country-specific and general evidence-based recommendations.

Keywords

Migration; Adaptation; Environmental Changes ; Transnational practices ; Morocco ; Senegal ; Democratic Republic of the Congo ; Belgium.