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Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n° 3

Environment and migration in DRC: The case of Kinshasa and Goma

Like many natural resource-dependent developing countries, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, extreme disasters and environmental degradation. But what is the relationship between environmental degradation and migration? In the framework of the MIGRADAPT project,¹ qualitative research was conducted in Kinshasa and Goma, two major cities of the DRC. Based on more than 30 in-depth individual interviews with members of migrant households, this research points to the complex relationship between migration and environmental factors.

Context and research questions

In the context of the MIGRADAPT project, we sought to answer the following research questions: (1) How do people perceive current environmental disruptions in their country and city of origin? (2) How do people perceive the environment to have influenced family members' migration? (3) How, and under which conditions, does migration support the adaptation and resilience of communities affected by environmental changes?

This policy brief is based on findings from two case studies in Kinshasa and Goma.

Kinshasa, the capital city of DRC, is among the largest cities in Africa (± 13.7 million inhabitants). It is threatened by erosion, which creates large gullies, and flooding, which regularly affects several districts during the annual rainy season. The poorest segments of the population live close to these exposed areas. Goma is a smaller city (± 1 million inhabitants), located in eastern DRC, on the shore of Lake Kivu, at the border with Rwanda. It is a regional trading hub that witnesses intense movements of population and goods. The 1994 Rwandan genocide turned Goma and its hinterland into a highly insecure area, where several armed groups are very active, living off mineral resources trafficking. Goma is threatened by several environmental issues, from forest overexploitation to the Nyiragongo volcanic eruption.

Climate change is projected to have different effects across regions of the DRC given its size, ecological characteristics, and geographic diversity. There is evidence that climate change and its effects on rainfall trends and temperatures will eventually exacerbate the vulnerability of rural populations in the DRC. Climate change, which increasingly affects seasonal cycles and other agro-climatic parameters, directly threatens the production of basic food for rural communities and, by extension, has potential implications for the already precarious food security of the entire Congolese population. Congolese are amongst the world's most food insecure populations.² Besides, environmental degradation often intensifies disasters. For example, unsustainable agricultural practices (e.g. slash-and-burn agriculture) accelerate soil erosion and runoff during heavy rains. In addition, deforestation and farming on steep slopes, without applying soil conservation techniques, increase the risk of landslides and flash floods. This problem is frequent in the Kivu region (eastern

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¹ http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/projects/MIGRADAPT_en.pdf

² Trefon, T. (2016). *Congo's Environmental Paradox: Potential and Predation in a Land of Plenty*. London: Zed Books, 208 p.

DRC) due to high population density. Rapid and sustained population growth also leads to a growing demand for fuelwood, food and building materials, which exacerbates forest degradation (Trefon, 2016). Extreme environmental phenomena can also spark conflicts over land and resources and pose increasingly serious problems, which could lead to rural-urban, intra-urban and international population movements. By 2050, DRC will be among the world's top ten most populated countries, a trend that could have a significant impact on population movements.³

Yet, it is complex to disaggregate the specific role of climate change or environmental degradation on migration patterns. The decision to migrate is rarely due to one single cause, except in the most extreme cases. On the contrary, social, political, economic, environmental and demographic factors are regularly interlinked with each other.⁴ An unknown proportion of migration flows from DRC results from poor environmental management, including uncontrolled exploitation of forests, the setting up of protected areas with its associated human rights violations, or the allocation of mining concessions without any measures to support displaced populations. Disasters can also lead to migration and leave populations destitute.

Main findings

Diverging perceptions of environmental changes in Kinshasa and Goma

In both cities, research participants recognize that the environment in Congo has changed significantly, especially in rural areas: deforestation, drying up of rivers, erosion, as well as seasonal changes were commonly referred to. Living in Kinshasa is depicted as a real challenge by its inhabitants, because of the degradation of their district and the changing climate, which create a hostile environment. In this megacity, environmental changes are a reality experienced by a large part of the population. Although people feel that what they experience in Kinshasa is similar to what is experienced by others around the world, the prevailing feeling amongst respondents relates to helplessness and a lack of knowledge in the face of such phenomena. While authorities are blamed for not playing their role properly, the population's behavior (e.g. through poor waste management) is also perceived to contribute to amplifying the dramatic consequences of environmental changes, such as drought, erosion and flooding. Yet, leaving Kinshasa to go back to the village of origin does not emerge as an option for internal migrants, and international migration is not necessarily identified as a solution to alleviate a precarious economic situation. Conversely, in Goma, environmental changes are not perceived as strongly as in Kinshasa despite related events, such as flooding or drought, that regularly impact it. If some consciousness of environmental changes exists among the respondents, they are mainly identified as affecting other parts of the country and of the world. Goma residents like their city despite recurrent security problems. Respondents do not aspire to leave the city, nor to go back to their village of origin (where insecurity is still prevalent), nor to migrate outside of DRC. Improved living conditions through the construction of quality roads and a reliable water and electricity supply is considered as a greater concern.

Migration and environmental changes: A complex relationship

While city life and access to modern infrastructure still strongly attract some respondents, internal migration to Kinshasa is often reportedly motivated by educational reasons. As for international migration aspirations, they tend to focus on Western countries (with a preference for North America) and appear mainly linked to economic reasons. In the Goma region, insecurity in villages is at the origin of most respondents' internal migrations. Some also migrate to the city to access more

³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/423)

⁴ Gemenne F., Peyraut M., Kassongo Kalonji E., Mayer B. & Lassailly-Jacob V. (2013) "Seul Dieu nous protège" - Migration et environnement en République démocratique du Congo. Rapport de recherche. Observatoire ACP sur les migrations. ACPOBS/2013/PUB18

opportunities and earn a better living. But surprisingly, almost none of the Goma respondents seemed tempted by the “mirage of the West”. The majority of migrants leaving Goma travel for study or work reasons. After earning money and/or expertise, it appears crucial to quickly return to Goma to contribute to the development of the community; several respondents have indeed mentioned that attachment to land and family is greater than the recurring problems of insecurity. Goma is moreover widely perceived as a city of opportunity. Finally, whether internal or international, migration frequently appears to be due to a multitude of social, political or economic factors (Gemenne et al., 2013) and the latter may be at the root of environmental degradation, such as uncontrolled deforestation, mineral extraction leading to industrial pollution or overexploitation of agricultural land resulting in soil erosion (Trefon, 2016). Such environmental phenomena do not alone determine migratory behaviors and decisions. As a result, migration is rarely used as a strategy to deal solely with environmental degradation and climate change, but it is nevertheless an effective way to reduce vulnerability to environmental change.

A limited prioritization of environmental protection and adaptation

For a large part of our sample, daily issues (e.g. the need to cover food expenses and school fees) are much more prevailing than environmental changes, although in Goma, the risk associated with the active Nyiragongo volcano regularly appears as a concern. Therefore, assisting those negatively impacted by environmental changes is not a priority for the respondents. Interest in adapting or in helping others adapt to environmental changes also remains limited. Local institutions in charge of environmental protection and disaster risk reduction have a limited intervention capacity since such issues are not prioritized by the authorities, who, instead of addressing medium to long-term concerns, are trapped in weak governance capacity and short-term policy vision.⁵ Teams are untrained, understaffed and underfunded. Such a system prevents the implementation of effective disaster risk and land degradation reduction actions, such as prevention and awareness raising programs.

The multiple roles of remittances

In Kinshasa, respondents explain that being supportive is a responsibility for family members living abroad. Indeed, international migration appears as a risk minimization strategy involving the whole family. Having a family member abroad is also depicted as a source of prestige. While family members make an enormous contribution to fund the international migration of one of their members, migrants then become responsible for financially supporting the family left behind, and, once settled in the host country, bringing in other family members to increase the resources to be sent to the family.⁶ Such “solidarity” has the perverse effect of perpetuating dependency. In Goma, it is more frequently admitted that nothing should be expected from migrants; self-help is seen as necessary to avoid being called “beggars”. According to our respondents, most of the financial flows sent by the diaspora are devoted to meeting the current food needs of the family. Remittances also guarantee access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Finally, transfers enable families to honor their commitments during specific events, such as baptisms, weddings or funerals (Sumata et al., 2004). This means that remittances are mostly intended to cover the daily needs of households. Indeed, several respondents mentioned that investments based on migrants’ remittances are rare, although remittances are sometimes invested in the informal tertiary sector (informal trade, store opening) or in private projects (real estate). Remittances therefore do not appear primarily dedicated to boosting the economy or development, nor to protecting the environment.

⁵ Michellier, C., Pigeon, P., Paillet, A. Trefon, T., Dewitte, O. & Kervyn, F. (2020). The Challenging Place of Natural Hazards in Disaster Risk Reduction Conceptual Models: Insights from Central Africa and the European Alps, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 11, p.316–332. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13753-020-00273-y>

⁶ Sumata, C., Trefon T. & Cogels, S. (2004). *Images et usages de l'argent de la diaspora congolaise : les transferts comme vecteur d'entretien du quotidien à Kinshasa*. In *Ordre et désordre à Kinshasa: réponses populaires à la faillite de l'Etat*, ed. Theodore Trefon. Tervuren, Belgium and Paris: Institut Africain and L'Harmattan.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the above-mentioned findings and on a broader picture of the environmental and demographic situation in DRC, several policy recommendations can be formulated. The first two focus on environmental protection measures, while the next two highlight actions towards preventing forced migration. Some could be handled at the national level; others by external partners:

- 1) ***Strengthening environmental and natural hazards risk management institutions and programmes***: Although institutions in charge of environmental and natural hazards risk management have been established in several provinces (including Kinshasa and North Kivu), the weakness of these still very-young institutions, the lack of data on environmental risks and natural hazards, and the absence of long term environmental and disaster risk reduction policies are major pitfalls for environmental and natural hazards risk management (Michellier et al., 2020). Strengthening the role of these institutions by providing them with the necessary financial and technical resources to fulfil their mandate could improve environmental and natural hazards risk management in the long term and increase the population's awareness of such issues, fostering joint action for environmental conservation.
- 2) ***Improving urban development planning in areas overwhelmed by rural-urban migration***: Different population growth rates across provinces, uneven development and regional patterns of insecurity have driven large-scale migration towards urban centers, which are experiencing rapid population growth: Kinshasa's population is expected to grow to 35 million by 2050 (UN, 2019). Better addressing the planning and development of urban settlements could contribute to a better management of space and of natural resources available in these areas. Such policies could have positive environmental consequences and reduce current threats faced by the environment and urban residents.
- 3) ***Enhancing regional security to reduce internal and international forced migration***: Ongoing insecurity in eastern DRC continues to be a driver of population displacement. There are currently 5 million internally displaced persons in the DRC, mainly due to conflict and insecurity,⁷ which plays a significant role in rural-urban migration trends, but also in terms of international migration (more than 940,000 Congolese refugees currently live abroad).⁸ The political stabilization of the eastern region has long posed a challenge for DRC's internal politics. This led to the establishment of peace agreements by foreign, regional and international powers, which remain, to this day, not respected by all parties.
- 4) ***Supporting ongoing efforts to accompany the demographic transition***: International migration needs to be addressed holistically in the light of population dynamics in general, and the demographic transition in particular, balancing the costs and benefits of development in both DRC and destination countries. Emigration from DRC to European countries is partly due to rapid population growth in the DRC and the inability of the Congolese labor market to absorb the excess labour force.⁹ It is partly absorbed by the advanced state of demographic transition (low birth rates) in most European countries which implies a demand for labour force in specific sectors (e.g. health care). Although international migration options are increasingly restrictive, families invest in setting up someone abroad for prestige and remittances. From the development perspective of these families and of DRC, migration entails advantages in terms of remittances, diaspora investment flows, and the improvement of migrants' education and skills. Driving DRC towards demographic transition could alleviate the need for some families to send one of their members abroad for financial support in return.

Read more

- MIGRADAPT newsletter no. 5 on fieldwork in DRC. English version: <https://mailchi.mp/20d56820222b/migradapt-newsletter-5-en>; French version: <https://mailchi.mp/5d5569fec1d6/migradapt-newsletter-5-fr>
- Beauchemin C. (2015) Migrations entre l'Afrique et l'Europe (MAFE) : Réflexions sur la conception et les limites d'une d'enquête multisituée. *Population* Vol. 70, p. 13-39.
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- Taithe A. (2013) Les changements climatiques dans la région des grands lacs ; Observatoire des Grands Lacs en Afrique. Note n°8. 18pp.

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⁷ <https://reporting.unhcr.org/drc>, 2020

⁸ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/drc>, 2021

⁹ IOM (2010) Migration en République démocratique du Congo : Profil national 2009. 134 pages.