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# 'The Most Important Quality of all Migrants—Forced Migrants Included—is their Agency.' Discuss with African Examples

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Current policies addressing forced migrants categorise these individuals as a homogenous group, a stream of people who embody political and security problems and thus need to be segregated from society. If not, they can potentially destabilize host communities. This is the 'forced migration problem'. To combat this homogenous view of forced migrants, recent literature examines the extent to which individual migrants control their own situation; to what extent does the person retain agency? Notably David Turton (2003) argues, "the most important quality of all migrants and indeed of all human beings [is] their agency." (p. 10). He does so to draw attention to the individuals within the homogenous masses. His hope is to inspire policy creation that addresses problems of migrants and their host communities, rather than creating policy to deal with 'the forced migration problem'. Using this argument as an initiation for discussion this essay examines the extent to which agency is the determining factor of a migrant's situation at their point of departure and upon entering a new community and suggests that while recognizing the individual is crucial, policy also needs to account for structural limitations which constrict choices.

This examination will be based in Sewell's (1992) definitions of structure and agency, as they reflect a particularly nuanced critique of the structure-agency debate. Structure, says Sewell, is the process of "mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action, and tend to be reproduced by that action" (1992, p. 19). Social action is, of course, committed by agents, which Sewell argues are "empowered by structures, by knowledge of cultural schemas that enables them to mobilize resources, and by the access to resources that enables them to enact schemas" (Ibid). In other words, agents use their knowledge of cultural schemas (i.e. knowledge of their environment and how to best function in it) in accordance with resources to which they have access (e.g. skills, social networks) to operate within the contextualizing structure. Therefore, agency can only be actualized when individuals have both knowledge and access; the extent to which they can utilize these elements is determined by the structure.

Accordingly, this essay initially agrees with Turton. Agency is the most important asset of a migrant, as all migrants have some degree of access and knowledge and it is this agency that gives people hope, through choice. However, this essay argues that to truly recognize the importance of agency, we must do so in the context of migrants' ability, or limited ability, to assert said agency due to structural constraints on access or knowledge. Indeed, the recognition of agency needs to be more nuanced than simply putting faces on the masses of migrants. Contrary to what Turton proposes, I argue that it is the recognition of migrants' needs, not their individuality, which will better equip states and the international community to design policy that actually assists migrants in coping with their transition and assists host communities in coping with the influx of people. I will pursue this argument through three parts. Firstly, I will focus on the emphasis on structure over agency, rather than simply humanizing the forced migrants to become what Turton calls, a "stranger in distress" (2003, p. 8). I argue that policy formation based simply on humanizing is highly problematic. It fails to force the state to recognize its role in creating and sustaining the 'problem of forced migration'. It also risks blaming the victim for their situation by fully attributing their situation to their incredibly limited choices. This argument will be supported by the second section which details the role of foreign and national actors in causing

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the 'forced migration problem'. In this section, the arguments of Stephen Castles (2003) and Paul Ocheje (2007) will demonstrate the international and national structural limitations on agency. Finally, I will examine the role of states and communities in hosting forced migrants. I argue that the policies utilized by the host communities can contribute to persistence of the 'forced migration problem'. In contrast, if structured properly, these policies could support a migrants' ability to assert their agency, shifting their role from burden to contributor. I will do so through key literature such as the Liisa Malkki (1995)/Gaim Kireab (1999) debate, which questions whether displaced individuals assimilate out of choice or necessity, as well as Michela Macchiavello's work (2003), which details how access to resources such as labour skills, social networks, start-up capital or savings, etcetera, determine a forced migrants ability to assert their agency.

## Emphasising Structure Over Agency

Turton asks why we need to distinguish forced migrants from other forms of migration. He responds with three possibilities. The first is that "forced migrants have a distinctive experience and distinctive needs" (2003, p. 7). But this response, he cautions, risks homogenizing forced migrants. Indeed "there are as many reasons for moving as there are migrants" (Ibid). The second response is based in Stephen Castles' work linking forced migration to "the wider process of social and economic change" and the "ever increasing North-South divide in living standards" (Ibid). Unfortunately, Turton does not explore this response beyond a description, neither supporting nor critiquing it. Instead he simply moves on to the third, his own, response: we need to distinguish forced migrants from other forms of migration to "make a special claim on our concern. They require us to consider issues of membership, citizenship and democratic liberalism. They require us to ask what our responsibilities are to the stranger in distress" (p. 8).

Like Castles' response Turton's own rationale calls on the reader to see the interconnectedness of 'us' and 'them' and acknowledges that the agent does operate in "complex external constraints" (Ibid). Unlike Castles, he focuses inevitably on the agent not the structure as the ultimate determinant, arguing that agents retain more choice than we may think; they are able to chose, for example, when, where and how to move (p. 10). In accordance with Sewell's discussion of agency, it would be incorrect to deny Turton of this claim; agency does still exist. Migrants use their knowledge (e.g. geographical layout, typical behaviours of potential persecutors) in combination with resources (e.g. known relatives to stay with, skills to generate income on the run) in an attempt to reach an end goal (e.g. a safe location for settlement). Turton is correct on this front.

However, this emphasis on agency for the purposes of formulating policy is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, Turton's rationale for what will cause policy makers to shift is dubious. In essence, he is calling on policy makers to have compassion for the individual. In doing so he expects policy responses will change from the currently dehumanizing policy, crafted for the supposed homogenous masses of forced migrants, to more nuanced responses flexible to accommodate the complex reasons of flight and needs upon arrival. The end result would be to mitigate the negative experience of the forced migrant in their new community and to relieve the host community of their burden, 'the forced migration problem'. Unfortunately, history makes us doubt that sheer compassion will be enough motivation to change government policy. Rather, policy changes typically come about by appealing to the state's self-interest.

Secondly, placing agency instead of structure as the final determinant of a forced migrant's circumstance is dangerous. If a person always has a choice in the matter it leaves them liable to blame for their current location and situation. Recipient communities can hold migrants personally responsible for turning up on their doorstep. Realistically, as will be shown in the next section, the migrants had to flee somewhere. There may have been three doorsteps to choose from but to hold the migrants responsible for choosing to end up in a certain location, essentially amounts to blaming the victim for seeking refuge.

Consequently, while I share in Turton's desire to humanize policy, such changes will not come about by focusing on agency alone and appealing to peoples sentiments. Instead the emphasis must be on the structural constraints on the agent, specifically those which force agents to flee in the first place and those which prevent the forced migrants from productively contributing to their host community (Macchiavello 2003; Birkland 2000).

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In other words, structure determines the options available to agents—in this case forced migrants—from the point in which they flee to their arrival in a new community or country, through to the process of settling in. If we can recognize this role of structure in determining agency we can then see that there is not a forced migration problem but problems faced by forced migrants (e.g. the problems that force them to flee, the problems they face upon arrival, and the problems they face settling in to the new community). If these problems are left to fester, negative side effects—associated with instability and collectively referred to as 'the forced migration problem'—will start to appear. If, however, policy can be written/adjusted to address the problems faced by forced migrants then reasonable steps can be taken to mitigate the negative effects of an inflow of migrants into a new community. The host community or country can be relieved of the migration burden (Macchiavello 2003; Birkland 2000).

## Governments as the Evictors

With this in mind let us then examine the structural elements that create forced migration in the first place. The causes of forced migration are both international and national. Internationally, Stephen Castles (2003) argues that pressures on the Global south to 'develop' contribute to the promulgation of forced migration. He further argues that we need to understand forced migration as an "expression of the global inequalities and societal crises" (p. 17). Forced migration is not simply the "result of a string of unconnected emergencies but rather an integral part" of global relationships (Ibid). His argument is overly focused on the North-South divide and fails to sufficiently recognize the role of regional actors (e.g. Nigeria in West Africa) in propagating similar sorts of circumstances. However, his argument—emphasizing the interconnectedness of state-interests and their effects on other state policy—is well worth considering. Fortunately, one can supplant his emphasis on 'Northern pressure' with 'foreign pressure', as I have done, without damage to his evidence in order to remedy the weakness. As evidence then, Castles notes that the implementation of internationally funded development programs—such as airports, dams, country clubs, roads, luxury housing, and game parks—forces millions from their homes annually (Castles 2003, p. 15). Further, foreign economic interests in natural resources often contribute to the initiation or prolonging of conflicts, which ultimately also force millions from their homes. For examples we can look to Liberia's interference in the Sierra Leone diamond trade, foreign oil interests in the Niger Delta contributing to ongoing hostilities, and Zimbabwe's diamond interest the Democratic Republic of Congo. Consequently, both in construction (development) and destruction (conflict), foreign involvement contributes to situations which force people to flee. When, where and how they flee is important to note as each migrant will have a different approach. Yet ultimately the answers to these questions are limited by the resources and knowledge which they can utilize given the structure which defines their situation.

Ocheje's study of forced evictions in Africa (2007) picks up the development projects outlined above and demonstrates how national policies also cause forced migration. Ocheje notes that whole communities can be evicted from their land and forced to find new settlements due to development projects like those listed above. However, these forced migrants rarely receive appropriate levels of compensation. Thus with a lack of capital to buy new land tenure, forced migrants use the limited access and knowledge they have available to find refuge, often in informal settlements (Ocheje 2007, p. 182). Once there, however, they continue to be susceptible to persecution through 'development'. Bratton and Masunungure (2006) and Potts (2006) demonstrate this through their analysis of Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe in 2005. The operation, which was justified as "restoring order" to Zimbabwe's cities by cleaning up the informal economy and housing in the city, led to the eviction of over 570,000 people (Potts 2006). The government intended the evictees to return to their rural village, despite the fact that many had lived in the cities for generations, were often originally nationals of other countries and therefore had no Zimbabwe home village. Most stayed in the city and moved in with other relatives or moved to a village temporarily (Bratton and Masunungure 2006).

Important in both the case of development projects and the slum raid are two things. Firstly, these people were forced to flee. Where, when and how maybe have been choices but guns and/or bulldozers dictated their evacuation, we cannot question their agency and suggest they could have stayed. Secondly, in the aftermath, had these people been given access to the appropriate resources, such as compensation, they could have used the funding along with other resources and knowledge available to better their situation by, for example, buying a new land plot. However, these options were not available. The choices of the forced migrants were limited by the structure, which pushed them into informal housing and relatives' homes. It was either that or live out in the open. Either way, in the end, most

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were left in worse living conditions than prior to the eviction (Ibid). This was due to the limited choices available to the agent.

## **Governments as the Host**

Forced migrants are equally limited upon their arrival in a new country, as Gaim Kibreab's (1999) critique of Liisa Malkki (1995) demonstrates. Malkki's study of forced migrants in Tanzania focuses on identity through a comparative study of Barundi and Hutu refugees in the Mishamo camp settlement and their counter parts who, wanting to avoid the camp, did not obtain refugee status and lived as illegal forced migrants in Kigoma town. In the case of the city settlers Malkki claims that their new lifestyle caused the breakdown of their group identity. Kibreab raises concern, however, which both allocates more agency to the forced migrants, as regards their identity, and also demonstrates the critical factors of the structure in which they lived. To illustrate, I quote Kibreab at length who suggests that the urban migrants did not lose their identity, but that they hid it:

The refugees in Kigoma town [Tanzania] lived as illegal residents under conditions of generalized fear in which they lacked formally or informally sanctioned rights and structures of redress. Under such circumstances, was it reasonable for Malkki or any outsider to expect them to reveal their true identity? The question that arises is whether this was a façade or a manifestation of loss of Barundi or Hutu identity. My contention is that this was simply a strategy, and their claim of belonging to one of the local populations was a façade (1999, p. 393).[1]

There are two things to pull out from this example. First, the theme of this essay: the forced migrants utilized their agency within the confines of the given structure to protect themselves as best they could from threats of persecution both by the local people and the government. Secondly, however, we must look at the reasons for this strategy, illegality of status in the community and fear of reprisal from the local people. In short, because the government viewed these forced migrants as a homogenous problem. The challenges they faced were not taken into consideration. Given their status as a burden these people were forced to live their life as a façade in order to survive.

Indeed, these are the structures in place against which forced migrants must struggle to assert their agency. Yet, Macchiavello (2003) argues that such cycles need not take place. If given the proper support, and settled "in an environment that values and favours the skills [forced migrants] possess," migrants can be transformed from a homogenous burden to individual assets to their new community (Macchiavello 2003, p. 8). Indeed, Macchiavello's study on refugees living in Uganda found that more than half of the sampled forced migrants were able to achieve self-sufficiency with assistance. Most of these people were self-employed and had access to resources and knowledge that aligned with the structure in place. Unfortunately, the other half were seriously constrained by their illegal status in the urban areas (refugee status was only granted to those willing to live in camps) and/or their lack of language ability, which prevented them from capitalizing on their skills and entering the formal employment market. It is not that the people did not want or know how to contribute but that the choice was not theirs to make. They did not have sufficient access to all the necessary resources or cultural knowledge to operate within the given structure. In some cases, perfectly skilled journalists, doctors, and other highly-educated people were prevented from attaining self-sufficiency and condemned to poverty. This is a direct result of structural constraints and it is in these circumstances of desperation that give rise to the political and security concerns so often proclaimed to accompany the 'forced migration problem' (Macchiavello 2003).

## **Conclusion**

That agency must be recognised in order to humanize policy dealing with forced migration is certain but to suggest agency, in isolation, is the most important quality of a migrant risks both blaming the victim for asserting their agency and excusing foreign and host governments from their role encouraging the 'forced migration problem'. Instead we must recognise firstly, that forced migrants assert their agency to the extent allowed by the structure which contains them. Secondly, states play a crucial role in creating forced migrants and the 'forced migration problem'. Thirdly,

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states as hosts must realise that if they adjust their structures, existing forced migrants will be able to use their agency to be an asset, not a burden, to their new community. Indeed a significant step in mitigating 'the forced migration problem' will be taken if states can come to terms with their historical role in causing the problem, and create policy which allow for the appropriate changes in their structure.

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[1]Italics are mine

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