

From Border Crossings to Everyday Mobility: The State of Migration Research in the Horn of Africa

LIDC Migration Leadership Team
Global Migration Conversation Nairobi
10-11 July 2018

Executive Summary

The Nairobi event was the second in a series of Global Migration Conversations organised by the London International Development Centre Migration Leadership Team (LIDC-MLT). This team has been formed to develop a shared strategy for supporting migration and displacement related research by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The Nairobi Migration Conversation brought together 34 researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, representatives of migrant and refugee associations and arts organisations working in the Horn of Africa region to identify: priority areas for migration research; pathways to impact that have been, or are likely to be, promising; and platforms for communication and collaboration that could help to bridge research, policy, practice and public engagement in the future. The key findings of the Nairobi Conversation are summarised below. A full report will also shortly be available.

Research Strengths in the Horn of Africa Region

The (Greater) Horn of Africa region is generally understood to include Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda. There are several specific features of migration research in the Horn of Africa region and, unlike other regions, there is not a perceived geographical concentration of academic resources, although Nairobi tends to be host to most migration-related events in the region. Overall, there tends to be a strong policy-focus to the current research portfolio, driven by the fact research agendas are normally set by northern partners who generate most research funding. This was said to have the effect of stifling innovation and making the debate on migration too practice-based. It was reported that there is tendency for academics in Africa to 'consume' theories and ideologies developed on the basis of data generated outside of the continent. How, participants asked, can we capture the way actual experiences in the region challenge these western theoretical assumptions? There is a perception that some South Asian postcolonial scholars have had more success in shifting these theoretical boundaries than academics within the Greater Horn of Africa region. There was discussion about how much there was to learn from south-south collaboration in comparative migration theory.

One participant joked, ‘I will be excited when I see an African scholar coming to Europe and saying, “your discussion on integration is rubbish, this is a common human process. Look!, this is our experience”’.

Increasingly, it was argued, global terms such as countries of origin, transit and destination are being challenged by the mobility trends in the Horn of Africa region. The global academy could benefit from investing more in bottom-up analysis of migration patterns across different regions in ways that do justice to their specificities as well as their similarities with other regions. For example, many migratory movements within the Horn of Africa region are seasonal or relate to time in a way that differs from other regions. As was raised at the South Asia migration conversation, this includes the historical movement of people including through processes of forced displacement and occupation. It was also stressed that physical movement is not necessary for feelings and processes of displacement to occur; populations can be rendered displaced without physical displacement, as in situations of occupation or statelessness: ‘what do we know about the emotional experience of displacement?’, asked one participant.

Scholars and policy makers in the global north, it was argued, need to take greater account of these differences and how they might influence how they respond to the needs of different migrant groups. The term ‘migration studies’, for example, in itself is seen in certain contexts as too limited. Some scholars, artists and practitioners rather use the concept of mobility which is more fluid, captures movement over place and time, as well as within and across borders. It is also seen as a state of mind, or a ‘practice’ related to ‘rendering fluid that which is static and fixed’. Mobility also moves us towards an idea of migration as something plural and avoids the linear bias of much policy making in the global north which sees migration as a one-way phenomenon. The migration research landscape in the Horn of Africa often takes a different approach to categorising people on the move compared to the global north and other regions. Many policy labels from the north are imposed on the region in ways which fail to capture this unique lived reality. Sometimes terminology exists in one language and not another, leading to misinterpretation and confusion. There is therefore an important role in migration scholarship for the study of how concepts relating to mobility and migration are understood in different languages.

There is a wealth of knowledge and experience within the region, participants stressed, which needs ‘freeing’ rather than ‘building’. Like those at the Nairobi Migration Conversation, participants were wary of the term ‘capacity building’ and instead emphasised the importance of knowledge sharing and exchange. The region has a strong artistic tradition which could play a far more important role in stimulating new ways of conducting research within the region, problematising fixed assumptions relating to migration and mobility, and promoting innovation in theoretical work.

Some key strengths of migration research identified in the region which have relevance beyond the region include the following:

- Linguistics and language studies in the context of migration
- Strong artistic tradition which is culturally valued and effective in engaging the public, but often poorly funded e.g. some artists spoke of the difficulties of securing long-term funding for music programmes in refugee camps, despite their clear

therapeutic impact and impact in terms of promoting understanding and acceptance of refugees among the general public.

- Integration of the arts and culture with scholarship as for example in the Hargeysa International Book Fair, a week-long annual event held in Somaliland.
- Unlike in the global north where mobility is seen as an 'irregularity' and problem to be solved, much migration scholarship from the region starts from the perspective that mobility is a fact of life and can be an opportunity. Scholars in the north can learn from this approach.
- A strong tradition of social work scholarship.
- Effective collaborations between local NGOs and scholars which challenge the academic-non-academic knowledge divide.
- A strong tradition of participatory research that is locally led and provides flexibility to adapt to changing contexts.
- The integration of migration (or rather mobility) studies into other academic disciplines unlike in the north where it is seen as something exceptional.
- A strong corpus of regional literature on displacement migrants and forced migration.
- The north can learn to 'unlearn' focus on states of emergency by looking at historical examples from the region.
- A long history of hospitality which can inform cultures in other parts of the world.
- An emerging rich investment in relevant technology e.g. Techfugees

Research Funding, Collaboration and Partnerships in the Horn of Africa Region

Several barriers to effective collaboration and partnership were identified in the region. These include the following:

- A lack of equitable partnerships with academic and artistic institutions in the global north. These tend to use extractive models of research that take capacity away from the region rather than enhance it. One participant commented, 'We need to move from a model of knowledge production based on attribution to one of contribution'.
- Limited resources to support the work of African scholars, especially early career researchers, and south-to-south network collaborations.
- Imposition of policy and legal categories from the global north
- More opportunities are needed for circulation of scholars from the region to enable them to work both within the region and globally. Scholars in the region would also like to host more scholars from other regions for long-term collaborations rather than a 'fly in and do a survey' model of research that is common. Such approaches commonly lead to feelings of exploitation and tokenism, and fail to capture complex phenomena.
- A lack of access to academic journals from the north and lack of journals produced in the region.
- When scholars in other regions collaborate with scholars in the region, the thematic topic is often too narrowly defined or pre-determined, over focused on development, economics and remittances. This approach stifles the opportunity for the emergence of new knowledge and ways of approaching the topic of mobility and migration, including its cultural aspects.

- Sometimes donors collect data but do not make it accessible to scholars and experts in the region who might be able to interpret it in different ways: ‘data without a common analysis tells us nothing’.
- Scholars in the region are sometimes not consulted on global migration developments e.g. Global Compact on Migration
- Sometimes research raises difficult questions that are hidden because of what was described as ‘the tyranny of consensus’. There is a need for spaces to disagree in scholarship and practice and be critical of INGOs and funding bodies without fear of reprisals in terms of losing future funding.
- Scholars and practitioners in the region need to be discerning about where their funding comes from and the agenda of funders, such as, for example, seeking ‘control of’ rather than understanding mobility.
- Time frames for research impact and delivery can differ across regions which can cause tensions in partnerships.
- A common lack of recognition of the important role of personal relationships in facilitating partnerships in and across academic institutions
- The over focus on impact e.g. writing blogs, speaking to the media can get in the way of researchers doing the important work of thinking.
- Partnerships work best where friendships are long-standing. This requires opportunities to convene together and exchange knowledge within and outside of the region (such as the MLT).
- There is a need for greater investment in migration research centres in the region (without falling into the trap of ‘problematizing’ migration and losing the richness of interdisciplinarity that currently exists. As one participant put it, ‘migration isn’t the interesting thing – it’s a constructed phenomenon, a lens through which we can see social change.’

Thematic Research Priorities in the Horn of Africa Region

Participants raised several pressing thematic priorities for those involved in migration scholarship and knowledge exchange in the Horn of Africa region. These included the following:

- As in Delhi, research gaps were identified in south-to-south regional migration
- Migration patterns *within* the region
- Lack of big data and reliable demographic data. However, there was a cautionary note that big data could be used to fuel crisis mentality and exclusionary politics as has been the case in Europe.
- Understanding migration criminalisation dynamics in the region compared to other parts of the world
- The lived experiences of undocumented and stateless migrants, including more comparative work with other regions
- The psycho-social aspects of mobility and migration e.g. return migration and gendered cultures of shame among Ethiopian women from the Gulf states; migration as an emotional experience.
- Labour migration within and beyond the region
- Migration and urban development

- Comparative migration work with South America.
- There is a need to hold space for *non-policy*/ non-action focused research to promote innovation and classical academic subjects such as philosophy and pure art. Not all research needs to speak to policy and practice as one participant put it, ‘academic researchers not caring about policy can do a great service to those who have to use those concepts and work in policy. The gap between policy and research can be productive.’
- Conceptualisation of borders, including the more psychological aspects, in ways which liberate the concept from the stranglehold of geography.
- Understanding better the links between migration, leisure, wellbeing and tourism
- The establishment of a data hub for the region and investment in technology
- Greater research focus on processes of change-making and policy development over time – not just focus on what needs to change, but how change comes about.