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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Black, R & Collyer, M 2014, 'Populations 'trapped' at times of crisis', *Forced Migration Review*, no. 45, pp. 52-56.  
<<https://www.fmreview.org/crisis/black-collyer>>

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## Populations 'trapped' at times of crisis

Richard Black and Michael Collyer

**A focus on those who are trapped challenges both theoretical and practical approaches to mobility and crisis, which prioritise movement. Those who have lost control of the decision to move away from potential danger have inevitably lost a lot more too.**

There are obvious humanitarian reasons to be concerned about situations in which individuals are unable to move to escape danger. Such immobility magnifies their vulnerability and may inhibit the access of humanitarian actors. There is also a growing weight of evidence that particular drivers, such as environmental change, may actually prevent rather than encourage movement.

To be 'trapped', individuals must not only lack the ability to move but also either want or need to move. The ability to migrate is clearly a complex and multifaceted indicator that includes a range of potentially relevant policies that may impede movement and access to significant resources.

A consideration of trapped populations must distinguish between ability, desire and need to move. The theoretical problem of distinguishing between not wanting and not being able to migrate and the possibility of involuntary immobility, that is, distinguishing those who wish to move (or need to do so in times of crisis) but remain *in situ* from those who do not wish to move, is likely to be extremely difficult, not least because people's judgement about whether it is necessary to move is likely to change over even quite short periods of time. A nuanced reframing of migration theory around the three concepts of migratory space, local assets and cumulative causation is undoubtedly a step forward in explaining the full range of mobility decisions.<sup>1</sup>

The justification for a concern with the immobile is that particularly vulnerable populations will be trapped. Yet the potentially extreme vulnerability of the involuntarily immobile justifies greater attention to this group anyway. It also

justifies some attempt to extrapolate existing information to gain some understanding of how those who are trapped might respond to progressively more severe crises or shocks and how these responses could be supported.

Conflict is one factor which may disrupt existing patterns of mobility and prevent further migration taking place. For example, it could be argued in relation to conflicts in the 1990s in Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Somalia and elsewhere that those in most humanitarian need were precisely those unable to flee from conflict and violence, rather than those who moved to become refugees or IDPs. Recognising this, international actors sought to establish 'safe havens' within these countries, where both *in situ* and internally displaced populations could benefit from UN protection and assistance, although in practice these zones did not always remain 'safe', as was illustrated most notoriously in the town of Srebrenica.

A consistent focus on movement "renders the involuntarily immobilised invisible". Lubkemann considers the situation in a drought-prone rural area of Mozambique during the civil war where a predominantly male group with established patterns of labour migration to neighbouring South Africa was able to benefit economically from forced migration, whereas members of the disproportionately female group left behind were prevented – by the intensification of violence – from engaging in their usual small-scale mobility in response to the prolonged drought of the early 1980s and so their impoverishment increased. Those who moved the least ultimately suffered most dramatically from the war's effects on migration precisely because their



Kosova Albanian refugees massed on the Kosovo-Macedonia border, May 1999. The refugees were held at the Blace border crossing for five days prior to being permitted entry into Macedonia. Photographer Howard Davies has documented the lives of refugees and asylum seekers for more than twenty years. More photographs from his extensive archive can be found at [www.eye-camera.com](http://www.eye-camera.com)

normal mobility strategies were profoundly disrupted through forced immobilisation.<sup>2</sup>

The immobilising effects of environmental change have also recently started to be observed. The 2011 Foresight report of the UK's Government Office for Science concluded that it was possible that migration might become less rather than more prevalent in the context of climate change.<sup>3</sup> In Bangladesh, it argues, "although mobility can serve as a post-disaster coping strategy, ... disasters in fact can reduce mobility by increasing labour needs at the origin or by removing the resources necessary to migrate." It has also been argued that "the greatest risks will be borne by those who are unable or unwilling to relocate, and may be exacerbated by maladaptive policies designed to prevent migration."<sup>4</sup>

The combination of multiple constraints on opportunities for mobility is likely to compound the impact of enforced immobility. This is just as true for the combined effects of environmental disasters and restrictive migration policy in Bangladesh as it is for conflict-related violence and drought in Mozambique: the greatest burden falls on those who are least able to cope.

### **Conceptualising trapped populations**

Those who are denied access to mobility entirely, whether through lack of various kinds of capital and/or through other constraints such as conflicts, hazards or policies, are likely to have a distinct set of vulnerabilities that are rarely acknowledged and hardly ever addressed.

Distinguishing between those who choose to stay and those who are forced to stay is essential if the notion of trapped populations is to have anything other than a very broad conceptual application. A basis for distinguishing involuntary immobility could be the need to move, based on some form of well-founded fear of the consequences if movement does not take place. The term 'trapped' highlights the issue of need to migrate.

Yet in a crisis situation, such as a political emergency or environmental disaster, an urgent intention to migrate cannot simply be conflated with need, since even where there is a clear humanitarian need to migrate some people will prefer to remain and even in extreme circumstances mobility results from a positive choice. Trapped populations are those people who not only aspire but also need to move for their own protection but who nevertheless lack the ability.

In the situation of environmental change, where migration can be seen as a form of adaptation to environmental change, low levels of capital indicate both high vulnerability to crises and low ability to move away. Different forms of capital may have a more direct influence on ability to move, such as financial capital or access to transportation, or a less direct influence, such as involvement in social networks beyond the area immediately affected by the crisis.

A striking example is New Orleans at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Those with resources left in advance of the approaching hurricane; those with friends and family elsewhere, with whom they could go and stay, were also more likely to leave. Those without resources (largely the poor, African-American, elderly or residents without private cars) remained, trapped as the floodwaters rose. The dangers of the crisis were disproportionately faced by the most vulnerable. Where mobility brings benefits, trapped populations are further marginalised.

If migration is a resource, policy that limits or controls that migration contributes to trapping populations, whether deliberately or incidentally. The function of migration policy in restricting mobility is now widely commented on, particularly in relation to detention and deportation. A progressive tightening of controls on international migration has become one of the most obvious limits to mobility. Indeed, the decline of international refugee protection, caused by the gradual closure



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of the territories of wealthier states, was a significant concern of the 1990s.

It is now well established that the dominant pattern of crisis migration involves temporary moves over short distances, and policy will therefore be most significant in trapping populations where it affects this type of movement. With the exception of populations immediately adjacent to borders, the enhanced controls on international migration are likely to have less impact than other, often non migration-related, policies.

### Being 'trapped' on the move

Protracted refugee situations offer another obvious example of a partially mobile yet trapped population. This is particularly the case in refugee or IDP camps where mobility out of the camp is officially restricted. Individuals exercised a degree of mobility to reach the camp and although this usually provides an immediate solution to short-term protection needs it also deprives individuals of possible access to resources which would allow them to move on, effectively trapping them in the camp.

Being trapped on the move may also result from a more individual migration project. For example it is now increasingly common for migrants from West Africa to have to stop in North Africa rather than reach Europe. The interruption of this type of movement increases vulnerabilities of migrants forced to wait for extended periods of time at particular nodes along the route, trapped at particular points along the journey, deprived of resources or blocked by migration controls and unable to return home.

### Conclusions

Politically acceptable humanitarian solutions are needed to the tremendous vulnerability faced by trapped migrants in certain contexts, such as Sudanese in the Sinai or Central Americans aspiring to migrate to the US in northern Mexico. In areas such as Morocco or South Africa, migrants themselves are organised and proactively campaigning for action.

Practical policy responses are not obvious, though there are existing points of engagement. The final Nansen Principle focuses on 'National and international policies and responses' which include planned relocation to be implemented "on the basis of non-discrimination, consent, empowerment, participation and partnerships with those directly affected ... without neglecting those who may choose to remain."<sup>5</sup> Choosing to remain is obviously substantially different from being unable to move.

Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata's declaration of a 'right to remain' for crisis-affected populations in 1993, which was initially criticised as an implicit attempt to limit mobility and restrict the right to seek asylum, inspired a policy of 'preventative protection' by the UN in the 1990s. In this context, although well intentioned and seemingly to protect those who were trapped, this policy could be seen as punitive for those trapped not simply by 'events' but as a direct or indirect consequence of policy itself.<sup>6</sup>

As long as we have limited information on trapped populations, the policy goal should be to avoid situations in which people are unable to move when they want to, not to promote policy that encourages them to move when they may not want to, and up-to-date information allowing them to make an informed choice. While it is difficult to imagine exact details of such policies, it does seem clear that they must not be restricted to national-level initiatives. Regional initiatives, such as the Kampala Convention, must be combined with city-level initiatives as part of the solution. Policies focused on enabling mobility and providing timely access to relevant information can be more easily targeted at the local level.

The problem is not people being in the wrong place in relation to climate change or other crises. The problem is people being in the wrong place and being unable to do anything about it. The most urgent issue is to identify how existing responses can

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reduce the likelihood of individuals being trapped in crisis situations. Advancing understandings of the reasons behind their immobility may help current policy responses to begin to take their true situation into account. At present our understanding of the mechanics of trapped populations is too limited to suggest any clear policy measures to reduce their vulnerability or enable them to move when they felt they needed to.

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