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# Migration Myths and Realities

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Edited by Dr Lars Cornelissen



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# **Migration Myths and Realities**

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# Editorial

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Lars Cornelissen

ISRF Academic Editor

**T**oday there are few topics that are the subject of such widespread, frenzied, and wanton mythmaking as immigration. The favourite wedge topic of far-right insurgent movements, for some decades now immigration has served as the linchpin of an exclusionary nationalism that is rapidly gaining electoral ground all over the world. This process has been facilitated by meek centrist parties who, more afraid of left-wing gains than of their own rightward drift, have excelled at normalising increasingly extremist rhetoric.

Decades of right-wing agitation, scare-mongering, and disinformation, and the centrist facilitation thereof, has ensnared public discourse on the theme of migration in a hopelessly tangled mythscape. Under these conditions sober analysis or informed judgement is increasingly difficult, hampered by a media ecosystem much of which is calculated to amplify scapegoating.

This does not mean, of course, that sober analysis is either impossible, futile, or hopeless. Indeed, sound research and rigorous

theory building remain key ingredients in the struggle against extremist drift.

It was precisely in the spirit of sober analysis that, in October 2024, the ISRF gathered a few dozen scholars in Warsaw for a conference on the theme of migration. Intent on pushing back against dominant myths and their harmful effects, speakers discussed the *realities* of migration, focussing on the causes and impacts of migration, its patterns and trends, its affects and geographies, its lived experience and representation. This issue of the Bulletin collects six of the papers that were presented in Warsaw. It will be followed, later in the year, by a second issue containing papers on other themes discussed during the conference.

The issue opens with an introductory piece by Christopher Newfield, the ISRF's Director of Research, recounting his main takeaways from the Warsaw conference.

The first contribution, by Michael Nwankpa, forcefully argues that European military intervention in the Sahel has worsened democratic backsliding in the region by propping up dictatorial regimes and kindling anti-Western sentiment in local populations. A key cause of this dynamic, he argues, is that European powers are motivated to intervene not out of a desire to restore order to the region but due to domestic pressures to curb immigration flows from Africa to Europe. Here the real damage caused by migration myths becomes starkly apparent: fear-mongering in Europe translates to authoritarian consolidation in parts of Africa.

Aurea Mota's contribution shows that migration myths are structured around a reified and short-sighted conception of the nation state, leaving no room for a broader conception of the natural environment. She explores the affordances and limits of a theory of nature rights, which would configure Gaia as a subject of rights as a way of both achieving environmental justice and demythologising migration.



Eric Kushinga Makombe, in his contribution, returns our focus to Africa as he documents key findings from a recent study in Zimbabwe's Chipinge district. There, most migration flows are forms of internal displacement, caused by corporate land grabs that have seen entire communities uprooted from their ancestral land. This form of internal migration intersects with the ever-worsening impacts of climate change to constitute a deep social, demographic, and environmental crisis.

Rebecca Yeo's thoughtful piece brings together disability activism and migrant activism, arguing that both movements are oriented towards similar goals and have much to learn from one another. Reporting on a recent art project undertaken with disabled people based in Bristol, Yeo draws out key insights from the disabled people's movement in the fight to achieve justice on multiple fronts.

In her contribution, Theresa Audrey O. Esteban discusses the history and geography of Rotterdam's most migrant-heavy neighbourhoods. She explores how, historically, migration flows into the Netherlands mapped onto shifting demand in the labour market before becoming the target of right-wing political campaigning. She ends with an impassioned plea for researchers to rise to the ethical and political challenges of their work.

The final piece of this issue is by Joanna Klimowicz, our guest speaker at the Warsaw conference. She reports on her harrowing experiences on the frontline of the Polish-Belarusian border, where refugees from Africa and the Middle East are facing exceedingly dangerous conditions. Seeking to render aid to refugees caught up in the 'push back' fiasco, she ended up bearing witness to an unfolding humanitarian crisis that will forever be a stain on Europe's moral consciousness.



# Introduction

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Christopher Newfield

ISRF Director of Research

I was very pleased with our 2024 conference, “Migration and Democracy in a Time of Climate Crisis,” which we held in Warsaw, Poland. It continued the collaborative address of a question that has run through our first two conferences in Athens and Bologna: how can scholarly thought have the kind of *agency* that enables knowledge to affect wider consciousness about events? How can *knowledge* have leverage over power? How can knowledge have power with power?

One general answer is by *reframing reality*—reframing it so that people and researchers, in various kinds of interaction, come to understand reality better and differently. What people *do* with new knowledge and *good* narratives is a separate question. But through independent research we at least all get better conceptual options.

The overthrowing of false narratives is a crucial function of scholarship, and it’s one of the implicit aims of the work we fund

at the Foundation. Building new ones is harder. Scholarship does succeed at this reframing, throughout history and over time, while usually taking too long in the process. There is always hope that we will be faster this time.

Our three conferences so far have been part of this long-term ISRF project to renarrate our selected issues, the better to disseminate new premises, political affects, and transformed thinking about the present and the future. I joked that I could be wearing a sign that says *ask me about our new narrative system*. It's less a joke than a research project.

Part of the work of renarration is to interlink issues correctly. The papers in this Bulletin, like the others at the Warsaw conference, reflect awareness that the topics are locked together in a vicious cycle: migration has been used by political movements to undermine support for democracy. Weakened democracy—a global trend—prevents collective action to address climate change. Unaddressed climate change encourages migration and supports opt-outs from social systems by people who have the money to escape. Hardened borders, gated communities, and private islands are the result—and a gross inadequacy of funding and of the political intelligence required to build green infrastructure and Big Green States.

There are positive countertrends: Britain, which started coal-based industrialisation, closed its last coal-fired power plant in October 2023. China is transforming the world's energy technology at the proper scale. It's harder to find positive countertrends in the realms of democracy and migration, but they are there.

The link between migration and democracy is particularly difficult. To mention just two papers here, Eric Makombe shows that in Zimbabwe, migration is a coping mechanism in response to corporate dispossession that is enabled by governments and against which there are no democratic checks.

Joanna Klimonicz, speaking of the front lines of the Polish “pushbacks” of migrants into Belarus, notes that the victory of the pro-democracy government of Donald Tusk made no observable difference to border enforcement operations. It’s as though democracies agree in practice that inducing migration and then repelling it are reciprocal parts of normal operations—and also a respectable way of inducing outrage and winning votes.

Several other papers also example how migration can reinforce democratic processes and increase public engagement. They challenge today’s conventional wisdom that political parties must treat migration as a problem to win elections. Would it help to mainstream discussion of open borders rather than relegate this discussion to the sidelines? This prospect also needs to be explored.

The 2020s was to be the decade of progress on climate, migration, and democracy. I have not given up on that. We must not give up. The papers here join many others in continuing to research the reversal of the vicious cycle.



# Democratic Backsliding in the Sahel and the Myth of Migration to Europe

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Michael Nwankpa

**S**ince the beginning of the twenty-first century, there have been at least 40 coup attempts in Africa, with half of those successful. Although coups and military regimes were prevalent in the 70s up until the late 90s, when many African states democratized following the end of the Cold War,

in the 2000s coup plotters and military rulers have failed to consolidate power.<sup>1</sup> However, in the last decade, Africa has witnessed a resurgence in direct military intervention through coups d'état. Interestingly, many of the coups are occurring in the Sahel—a semiarid region of western and northcentral Africa that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean eastward through northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, the great bend of the Niger River in Mali, Burkina Faso, southern Niger, northeastern Nigeria, south-central Chad and into Sudan. Indeed, the seven military coups that occurred in the last four years (2020–24) occurred in four countries in the Sahel: Mali (18 August 2020 and 24 May 2021), Guinea (5 September 2021), Sudan (25 October 2021), Burkina Faso (24 January 2022 and 30 September 2022) and Niger (26 July 2023). The last successful military coup occurred in the small central African country of Gabon on 30 August 2023. Many of the recent coups in Africa are occurring in former French colonies.

The militaries in former French colonies in the Sahel, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, have capitalized on a growing anti-French and, by extension, anti-Western sentiment, to seize power from elected democratic governments. They have managed to hold on to power so far, spurning the transition process to democratic rule, based on popular discontentment against the West and support from non-Western superpowers, mainly Russia. Bolstered by military support from the Wagner Group, a Russia-supported mercenary organization, and threat of military intervention from ECOWAS, the regional government, the junta governments of Mali,

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1 America and the West tolerated military regimes during the Cold War as they sought to gain advantage over the Soviet Union and its promotion of communism on the continent. However, with American hegemony established in the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, the West abandoned its tacit and sometimes explicit support for military rulers and regimes. This event, supported by internal conditions in Africa, ushered in the Third Wave of democratization with many African countries embracing multiparty democracy. The international community and the African Union, AU, has since then maintained a strong position against military takeovers—making it difficult for coup plotters to entrench themselves in power.



Burkina Faso and Niger have withdrawn from ECOWAS and formed a military alliance, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The formation of AES provides impetus for the consolidation of military rule in Africa as it emboldens other authoritarian governments. The military governments of the AES have cancelled existing military agreements with France, the EU and other Western nations, including the sacking of a UN stabilization mission in Mali, MINUSMA. Chad and Senegal have also recently cancelled their military cooperations with France. In response, the EU and other Western donors have either reduced, suspended and/or terminated their aid to the AES states. The Western-led stabilization missions and interventions in the Sahel since 2012 have produced very little improvement in the lives of the Sahelian people.

### **Western-led Interventions and Stabilization Missions in the Sahel, 2012–2024: Motivations and Impact**

In 2012, France intervened in Mali, at the invitation of the interim government of Mali, to fight against the Tuareg rebel group, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad; MNLA) and Islamic Jihadist groups (such as Ansar Dine, AQIM and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in Africa, MUJAO) who had captured northern Mali and started threatening the control of power by the central government. This sparked a flurry of international and regional military and peacekeeping interventions in Mali and the greater Sahel. Some of the missions included two French-led military interventions (Operation Serval, 2013–14, and Operation Barkhane, 2014–2022), a French-supported regional coalition force, G5-Sahel Force (comprising the armies of Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Chad), the UN Security Council (UNSC)-backed African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA, 2013–2023), the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM, 2013–2024), and the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali, 2015–present).

Evidently, the Sahel witnessed unprecedented but not completely unjustifiable interventions and stabilization missions. The interventions and military operations responded to the huge challenges that the Sahel region presents. The Sahel region is not only considered the poorest region of the world, but also the region most affected by climate change (marked by long droughts, extreme flooding during the monsoon periods, high precipitation variability and extremely high temperatures that contribute to food insecurity and poverty). It is also faced with challenges relating to refugees and migrants, transnational organized crime, and jihadist insurgencies.

While these present credible concerns and justifiable reasons for intervention, however, external interventions in the Sahel are mainly motivated by reasons other than these. The external interveners are driven by their own strategic interests which revolve around preventing mass migration to Europe and countering insurgency, rather than a genuine interest in finding a lasting solution to the crisis. This explains the highly securitized and militarized nature of the interventions in the Sahel. Western nations' securitized interest in the Sahel appears incongruent to the immediate concerns of the Sahelian people which is their 'living conditions, which have come under immense pressure'.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, military interventions in the Sahel predate the 2012 mission in Mali and reflect other deeper underlying motivations which revolve around reconfiguring a new political order.<sup>3</sup>

The plethora of interventions in the Sahel has made very little impact. The security situation in the region remains unchanged or has even worsened. There seems to be a consensus in the literature that the external interventions exacerbated the conflict

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2 Morten Bøås, *The Sahel crisis and the need for international support* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2019), 5.

3 Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism', *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 855-874.

and insecurity in the Sahel.<sup>4</sup> External interventions in the Sahel have also undercut democracy and consequently increased militarization. This is done through the tacit support of and cooperation with authoritarian governments, who are amenable to external strategic interests. According to Rida Lyammouri, an expert on the Sahel, the civilian 'regimes that were ruling Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, despite [being] praised by the West, were known to be corrupt, they were known to be abusing power, there were many scandals involving the presidents of the three countries, yet the West continued to close their eyes to what was happening'.<sup>5</sup> Blinded by an obsessive concern with countering terrorism and preventing illegal migration to Europe, Western governments have supported authoritarian governments and encouraged illiberal and undemocratic practices that make them complicit in the militarization of the Sahel.

### Migration to Europe: A Myth?

It is therefore important to measure the true scale of the migration crisis that has forced the West to compromise its liberal principles of democracy and human rights. EU–Africa cooperation is based on two distinct frameworks: 1. The Partnership Agreement with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states (also known as the Cotonou Agreement), signed in 2000 and 2. The Joint Africa–EU Strategy (determined at periodic Africa–EU Summits). The Cotonou Agreement has been replaced by a new Agreement—the Samoa

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4 Clionadh Raleigh, Héni Nsaibia and Caitriona Dowd, 'The Sahel crisis since 2012', *African Affairs* 120, no. 478 (2021): 123–143; Ahmet Berat Çonkar, 'Development and security challenges in the Sahel region', *Draft Report. Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM). Nato Parliamentary Assembly* 6 (2020); Bruno Charbonneau, 'The climate of counterinsurgency and the future of security in the Sahel', *Environmental Science & Policy* 138 (2022): 97–104; Denis M Tull, 'Operation Barkhane and the future of intervention in the Sahel: the shape of things to come', *SWP Comment* (2021): 4.

5 Interview with Rida Lyammouri, 'The Alliance of Sahel States: A Challenge to ECOWAS', hosted by Michael Nwankpa, Episode 40 of Conflict & Development in Africa Podcast, 31 July 2024. Available at: <https://youtu.be/or-covu4PHA>.

Agreement which was signed by the EU and ACP countries on 15 November 2023. The Samoa Agreement is now the overarching framework for EU relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries. One of the six strategic priority areas for EU–Africa cooperation in the Samoa Agreement is ‘Migration and Mobility’. The other priority areas include human rights, democracy and governance; peace and security; human and social development; inclusive sustainable economic growth and development; and environmental sustainability and climate change. Arguably, migration remains the most important concern of the EU, particularly in its relationship to and interventions in the Sahel.

In December 2007 during the second Africa–EU Summit of Heads of States and Governments in Lisbon, the EU launched the Partnership for Migration, Mobility and Employment (MME). Since 2017, the Africa–EU cooperation on migration is done through the Africa–EU Migration and Mobility Dialogue (MMD) framework. In 2015, the EU and African Heads of States and Governments held an international summit, the Valetta Summit, to address migration challenges. At the end of the Summit, they adopted a political declaration and an action plan to address the different aspects of the migration issue including irregular migration, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, protection of migrants and asylum seekers, cooperation on return, readmission and reintegration, legal migration and mobility as well as root causes of displacement and irregular migration. During the Summit, the EU established the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. The EU has also signed bilateral agreements with individual states—Cape Verde (2008), Niger (2015),<sup>6</sup> Nigeria (2009, 2015), Mauritania (2024), Senegal (2016)<sup>7</sup> and Ethiopia (2015). Evidently, with the expansive migration policies and agreements between Africa and the EU, migration and mobility is a major concern for the EU.

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6 Cooperation with Niger has been suspended since the coup of 26 July 2023.

7 The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA) and Senegalese authorities cooperate in the context of the Africa–Frontex Intelligence Community (AFIC).

Interestingly, the vast percentage of migration (up to 84%) in Africa is internal. More interesting is the fact that the great majority of migrants in Africa are internally displaced, meaning they do not cross borders, but stay within their countries. While migration outside Africa has been increasing, especially in the last decade (due to economic crisis, climate change and political and armed violence among other things), African migrants constitute the lowest figure when compared to the world's total migrants (which is around 250–290 million). Only 26 percent of African migrants live in Europe. 53 percent live in Africa while 12 percent live in Asia and 7 percent in North America.<sup>8</sup> Seemingly, overwhelming migration from Africa to Europe is a myth. Yet, Europe has securitized and politicized migration. The EU has expanded its border control by establishing asylum centres in third countries including Africa through Frontex (the EU border and coast guard agency)—reflecting an extra-territorial reach and control. More so, the securitization and politicization of migration fail to conceal the fact that receiving countries in Europe benefit from migrants' economic contributions. This has been made more acute in the face of labour shortages in an ageing European population.

## Conclusion

This study has focused on recent militarization in Africa, particularly in the troubled Sahel, a region that is notorious for extreme climate change and, consequently, climate change-induced mobility. The study concludes that the securitization and politicization of migration by European countries both directly and indirectly contribute to democratic backsliding in the region as support to local partners encourages militarization and other undemocratic

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8 UNDESA 2017, as cited by Erhabor Idemudia and Klaus Boehnke, *Psychosocial experiences of African migrants in six European countries: A mixed method study* (Springer Nature, 2020).

practices that are counterproductive.<sup>9</sup> The study also argues that migration from Africa to Europe is not as significant in comparison to migration and displacement within Africa—hence concluding that the idea of high migration figures between Africa and Europe is a myth. We need to adopt a humane and sensible approach to migration—one that not only addresses the root causes and drivers of migration, but more so, amplify the mutual benefits that migration brings to both origin, transit and destination countries.

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9 Wendy Williams, 'African migration trends to watch in 2024', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 2024. Accessible at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-migration-trends-to-watch-in-2024/>. P. 10: 'Senegal passed a National Strategy to Combat Irregular Migration in 2023 to reduce irregular migration by 2033. The EU provided Senegal with \$9.9 million—part of which went toward a new headquarters for Senegal's air and border police—to stop irregular migration. Lacking other human security measures, this approach, like those in Niger and on the central Mediterranean coast, may increase interdictions as well as make crossings more dangerous—as increasing death and missing reports indicate.'

# Towards a Deep History of Gaia

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## *Displacements, Integration, and Rights Beyond Migration Myths<sup>1</sup>*

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Aurea Mota

**T**he prevailing understanding of migration in contemporary political discourse continues to rely on the myth of the enclosed nation as the central driver of internal human development. The historical formation and transformation

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1 This short essay text was written while holding a visiting fellow position at The Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies “Futures of Sustainability,” University of Hamburg, Germany. I am deeply grateful for the support I received and for the insightful comments that emerged from discussions with my colleagues on various occasions throughout my stay. I also would like to thank my colleagues for the comments they made to my presentation on the topic during the conference the ISRF 2024 Conference Migration, Democracy and Climate Change.

of the modern state exemplifies this. Benedict Anderson described the nation as a socially constructed community, formed through self-perceptions that distinguish certain groups from others.<sup>2</sup> This social construction of the idea of modern community perpetuates the myth that the nation, with its system of rights, duties, and protections, bestows privileges upon those within its political boundaries while excluding externalised 'others'. The long-lasting consequences of these modern myths can be felt in many realms and moments of history because, as social scientists know well, myths can be real at least in terms of their consequences. For instance, the ideas of national attachment and economic growth that have driven conservative and extreme-right movements in many parts of the world since the beginning of the twentieth century have been sustained by the constant resignification of the meaning of 'belonging' and of the 'other' and its relation to state order.

A contemporary example of the reinterpretation of migration and borders is the European Union (EU). As a supranational entity, the EU should champion diversity, hospitality, and democracy – key elements of European heritage and identity<sup>3</sup> – as part of its foundational principles. The growing number of 'irregular migration', as it is called by the European Commission, reached its peak in 2023 when about 355,300 people (the official number) entered the EU without complying with the protocol.<sup>4</sup> This has led states such as Germany and the Netherlands to reinstate internal border controls, citing public security concerns in contravention

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2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983: Verso).

3 Gerard Delanty, *The European Heritage: A Critical Re-Interpretation* (London 2017: Routledge).

4 All official data from the European Parliament. This and other facts and figures available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20170627STO78419/countering-irregular-migration-better-eu-border-management> (accessed on the 19<sup>th</sup> November 2024)



of the Schengen Agreement's free-movement principles. At the Union level, these policies and other forms of enforcing exclusion undermine the ideal of European hospitality. Josep Borrell's 2022 controversial – to say the least – speech, describing Europe as a 'garden' to be defended from the encroaching 'jungle,'<sup>5</sup> underscores how European policies have adopted exclusionary measures that betray the modern democratic principle of hospitality. Thus, regional decisions and political preferences determine not only the permeability of nation-states but also that of the EU itself.<sup>6</sup> Political actions against the entrance of humans into EU territory are only the tip of the iceberg of a larger crisis that we are living through at the moment. In historical terms, the crisis reflects broader modern tensions: grassroots struggles for emancipation and liberty clash with elite-driven (cultural, political, and economic) desires to preserve power and control.<sup>7</sup> As we will see in the last part of this essay, this struggle for emancipation is one that involves not only the recognition of the rights of human beings but also of other 'natural' beings that have been excluded from the modern system of nation-driven rights.

This essay departs from this brief critical examination of the modern imaginary concerning the nation, the system of belonging and borders to make comprehensible the other two most pressing challenges of our time: the democratic and climate crisis. The focus of the discussion in the next sections will be on offering a contribution to the development of a historically grounded perspective that represents a basic knowledge expansion to

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5 The speech and the video are available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot_en) (accessed on the 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2024)

6 The differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees after the 2022 Russian invasion, compared to the Syrian refugee crisis since the onset of the 2011 war is an example of this. A powerful portrait of that situation is offered by Agnieszka Holland's 2023 movie *Green Border*.

7 Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (Cambridge 1994: Routledge).

be pursued in order to fight against these connected crises. The reasoning presented in this essay is that to find a way of addressing these crises in the present, a historical reconnection between human and natural history is a key step to understanding theoretically the problems we are facing and finding practical solutions to them.

### **For a Deep History of Gaia**

To fully deconstruct the myth of the nation-state as the foundation of human development, we must consider the longer historical arc of human and natural integration. Migration – of humans and non-humans, such as animals, plants, and sediments – has historically driven environmental adaptation, scientific progress, and intellectual advancements. This is shown by what has been framed as ‘deep history’,<sup>8</sup> the long-run integration of natural and human history. The Earth’s ongoing development is one of constant migration, displacement and integration, forming the equilibrium that allowed the emergence of *Gaia*: a self-regulating ecosystem where life co-evolves in tandem with its environment.<sup>9</sup> Even though it seems a reasonable statement for most contemporary natural scientists, things have slowly started to move in this direction only very recently. Thus, one can expect that the impact of this interpretation is very much absent in most of the social sciences and historical analysis. Trying to overcome that, in this essay it is argued that we need to start to understand that human history

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8 Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley 2008: University of California).

9 James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at the Life on Earth* (Oxford 1979: Oxford University Press). In his book, Gaia is named after the Greek goddess that represented the Earth.

is part of a broader, 'nationless' framework<sup>10</sup> that links human development to the Earth's natural history.<sup>11</sup>

James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis', as articulated in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, presents Earth as a self-regulating organism where life and its environment are tightly intertwined in a symbiotic relationship. Lovelock challenged conventional evolutionary theories by suggesting that organisms shape their environment as much as they are shaped by it. This mutual interdependence reveals the Earth as a symbiotic system, where disruptions – such as pollution, deforestation, and greenhouse gas emissions – threaten planetary balance. Lovelock's later works, including *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006) and *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* (2009), warn of tipping points beyond which Gaia's resilience may fail, leading to catastrophic changes in global temperatures and ecosystems. His insights compel a shift away from anthropocentric worldviews, recognising humanity as one element within a fragile, interconnected system. In these books, Lovelock builds upon the Gaia hypothesis to discuss the impact of human-induced climate change on Earth's self-regulating systems. In doing so, he added a warning tone to the original hypothesis that wasn't as pronounced in his earlier writings.

To address these challenges, at both the theoretical and practical level, we need to rethink the established boundary between natural and human histories scientifically. To that end, one of the first structures that should be addressed refers to the discussion about when the history of our existence starts. The history of humanity is traditionally recounted using the Judeo-Christian chronological framework as a guiding principle. In the book *On Deep History and the Brain*, historian Daniel L. Smail argues persuasively for bridging what he terms the 'recent past' – extending no further than 6,000

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10 Aurea Mota, 'Uncivilized Civilizations: reflections on Brazil and comparative history', *Social Imaginaries*, 2, no. 2 (2016): 71–86.

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009): 197–222.

years ago, with a focus on the last 3,000 years – and the ‘deep past,’ which encompasses everything traditionally excluded from the concept of human prehistory. Smail states that his research purpose is served if we acknowledge that the short chronology is a constructed narrative, that history need not be so narrowly defined, and that a form of ‘history’ began long ago in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, to acknowledge the origins of human history in Africa is to accept that the formation of the world as we know it has been shaped by the movement of groups across different regions. If the world had political boundaries 300,000 years ago, humanity as the form of life that we know today would not exist. Humans evolved out of a unique transformation of physical and behavioural patterns related to the adaptation of the species to different spatialities that it inhabited in different parts of the globe. It has been proved that the development of the human brain is related to the transformations that come from interaction with each other and the surroundings in the different stages of human history.<sup>13</sup> These migrations have influenced the development of the world and, together with what we term ‘natural forms of life,’ have created the balance necessary for the emergence of Gaia. On the other hand, the acceptance of the fact that human history started much before what has been traditionally accepted is the basis for the critical reinterpretation of the human past, present, and future on Earth.

This is so because, against the contemporary dominant imaginary of the world as organised into static, nation-enclosed settled societies, an alternative view informed by deep history is that displacements were and still are the norm in history, indeed the movement of humans will increase drastically in the next

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12 Smail, *On Deep History*, 15.

13 Christopher S. Henshilwood & Curtis W. Marean, ‘The origin of modern human behavior: critique of the models and their test implications’, *Current Anthropology*, 44 (2003): 627–651.

years due to climate change.<sup>14</sup> It follows from this ontological and historical fact that movement, not stasis, was the norm. In that key, Chakrabarty has developed an analysis of the Anthropocene, addressing the epistemic divide historically maintained between 'Natural History' and 'Human History'.<sup>15</sup> Starting from the premise that human beings have become a geological force, thereby erasing the distinction between natural and human history, Chakrabarty explores how the climate crisis appeals to our sense of 'human universals' while simultaneously challenging our capacity for historical understanding.<sup>16</sup> This perception of a collective 'catastrophe,' driven by humans acting as a geological force, fosters a sense of shared universals. For the purposes of this essay, this discussion aims to illustrate, from an alternative perspective, how overlooked layers of human history can be integrated to reconsider transformations in human history and its connection to what I term the deep history of Gaia.

As with Smail and Chakrabarty, conventional historical narratives must be questioned in light of a significant transformation that emerged with modern developments, particularly the rise of the Anthropocene as the epoch-defining modern existence. As Chakrabarty highlights, climate change debates have profoundly altered our perception of historical time. It is crucial to extend the implications of this transformation to consider a historicity of the Earth that accommodates timeless layers and forms of history. This understanding undermines the unquestioned legitimacy of the modern nation-state as a natural or inevitable framework for human organisation. Instead of this narrative, history must be reintegrated within an Earth context, connecting human and natural trajectories. One of the practical positive consequences that this

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14 Gaia Vince, *Nomad Century: how to survive the climate upheaval* (London 2023: Penguin).

15 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Climate and Capital: on Conjoined Histories', *Critical Inquiry*, 41 (2014): 1-23.

16 Charkrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 201.

analysis could bring is to make a clear room for the acceptance that not only humans should be rights holders. To preserve all forms of life and the persistence of Gaia, other forms of beings need to have their history told, embedded in 'our' history and system of rights. This is a topic developed briefly in what follows as a way of making it clear that this enlarged conception of history can be a first step for other broader practical transformations to take place.

### **Displacements, Environmental Justice, and the Rights of Nature**

A deep historical method is an important tool to be applied not only to theoretically criticise the superficial view of migration as a bad thing for development, by showing how migration is the very basis of human development and the formation of human cognitive capacity. The drive in the direction of a deep history of Gaia is also a necessary step to understanding a key issue of environmental justice: namely, the emerging issue of the Rights of Nature (RoN).<sup>17</sup> Western legal systems, rooted in the separation of nature and culture, have historically justified the exploitation of natural 'resources' by humans as rights holders. In this system, nature has been treated as an object to be dominated rather than a subject with intrinsic value. However, many societal groups conceptualise nature as a subject integrated into a non-hierarchical worldview. To say that nature is composed of different kinds of subjects is not the same as saying that this subject, i.e. 'nature,' has subjectivity, in the sense of the capacity of self-reflection or being able to

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17 There are many examples of countries that passed laws or changed the constitution to incorporate RoN. To mention a few: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, New Zealand, Spain, USA, etc. To see a map with all the countries that have implemented RoN, look at: <https://www.garn.org/rights-of-nature-map/> In Ireland, the "Report and Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss" released in March 2023 is assertive when said that in the country 'should be a referendum of the people to amend the Constitution to protect biodiversity.' It is not clear if that is going to happen. In any case, this steep move forward by Ireland is the first one observed in Europe in the direction of changing the constitution to incorporate RoN.

originate by themselves what Castoriadis has called a radical imaginary.<sup>18</sup> Recognising nature's rights challenges anthropocentric frameworks and calls for embedding humanity within a life-centric model of existence.

The integration of RoN as a movement towards ecological justice requires rethinking humanity's role within the Earth system. Modern systems of rights must evolve to reflect this interdependence, embedding human agency within a broader ecological context. Doing so would address the anthropocentric assumptions that have driven unsustainable exploitation and inequality during the modern era. The Anthropocene compels a profound shift in how we research and narrate history. It is a history where human and natural timelines converge into a deeper historical timeframe, in which life has been displaced and replaced to ensure the conditions of our existence. It would be the time now to slow down *anthropocentric reasoning* – playing with an idea that comes from the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers<sup>19</sup> – and move in the direction of *life-centric reasoning* if contemporary societies want to be able to address the climate and democratic challenges of our contemporary times.

The quest for global environmental justice must consider (re) embedding all forms of life within a space less rooted in isolated nations and more aligned with the Earth's ecosystemic condition. A full history where all histories – natural and human – merge beyond the human timeframe is very much needed. This is a deep history of Gaia. A history of lives (human and 'natural') in motion, seeking better conditions of existence and evolving within spaces that, only much later, were divided by political borders. Within this context, the modern history of nation states, defined by political boundaries, need no longer be regarded as a 'natural fact.' Instead, it can be

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18 Cornelius Castoriadis, 'Radical imagination and the social instituting imaginary', in D.A. Curtis (ed.) *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford 1997: Blackwell): 321–337.

19 Isabelle Stengers, *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (Cambridge 2017: Polity Press).

understood as part of a relatively recent political imagination – one that, like any other construct, can be reimagined and transformed. The same ‘denaturalization’ would have practical implications for our shared understanding of rights and belonging. Opening the doors to seeing that the challenges of the Anthropocene require us to accept that other beings are part of our history, and without creating the structure to keep them existing, like by granting them rights, our present and future history is fading.



# Climate Change, Land Governance, and Migration

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## *In Zimbabwe's Chipinge Rural District*

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Eric Kushinga Makombe<sup>1</sup>

**I** first visited the Chipinge rural district, in Zimbabwe, in 2012 to investigate the outcomes of rural land grabs following Green Fuel's establishment of an ethanol plant in Chisumbanje in 2008. The pressures of climate change prompted some local authorities and private entities, such as Green Fuel, to pursue land for large-scale agricultural projects under the guise of development. The global food price crisis of 2007–2008 and the ensuing financial turmoil increased these pressures.<sup>2</sup> The

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1 The author would like to acknowledge the ongoing support and funding from Gerda Henkel Stiftung that made this research possible.

2 D.R. Lee, J. Berazneva & M. Ndulo, "Africa's Dual Crises: The Food and Financial Crises and their Effects in Sub-Saharan Africa—Introduction and Overview," in: D.R. Lee & M. Ndulo (eds.), *The Food and Financial Crises in Sub-Saharan Africa: Origins, Impacts and Policy Implications* (Wallingford 2011: CABI), 1.

**projects that emerged from land deals involving the state and private capital often displaced local communities, forcing them from their ancestral lands without adequate compensation or alternative arrangements.<sup>3</sup>**

The government, acting through the Chipinge Rural District Council (CRDC), actively facilitated Green Fuel's access to communal land for sugarcane production. While resisting the evictions, the displaced communities were still hopeful that they would return to their communal lands. However, the land conflict evolved over the years, with several government departments competing to "reclaim" lands previously ceded for rural settlement. For instance, the CRDC's urbanisation initiatives involved appropriating communal lands for development projects, such as housing or commercial ventures. The affected communities expanded to other wards such as Mahachi, Kondo, Munyokowere, Ndiyadzo, and Green Valley. Owen Dhliwayo states that ongoing land conflicts affect "16 out of the 30 rural wards in Chipinge district."<sup>4</sup>

This essay explores the complex interplay between climate change, land governance, and migration in Chipinge Rural District, Zimbabwe. The research focuses on migration as a coping mechanism for rural smallholders facing the combined pressures of meteorological and ecological changes and land dispossession. The study will explore how these interwoven pressures drive migration patterns in Chipinge and their broader impact on rural communities. The interplay of climate change and land governance

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3 W.W. Wolford, B. White, I. Scoones, R. Hall, M. Edelman & S.M. Borras, "Global land deals: what has been done, what has changed, and what's next?" *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2024): 1-38.

4 Owen Dhliwayo, "Land Dispossession and Legal Battles in Chipinge: A Call for Mediation to Restore Peace and Protect Livelihoods," *Zimeye*, 13 February 2024, accessible here: <https://www.zimeye.net/2024/02/13/land-dispossession-and-legal-battles-in-chipinge-a-call-for-mediation-to-restore-peace-and-protect-livelihoods/> (DOA: 25 November 2024).

issues in Zimbabwe underscores the need for comprehensive and context-specific solutions.

## Land grabs and displacement in Chipinge

Green Fuel's ethanol plant in Chisumbanje marked a significant turning point for land relations in Chipinge. This project led to widespread land dispossession among local communities, initially only affecting those in Chisumbanje and Chinyamukwakwa. The loss of ancestral lands often overshadowed the promise of development, resulting in resistance from the affected communities.<sup>5</sup> Villagers have faced legal challenges, with recent court cases highlighting disputes over land ownership and development rights, particularly against the CRDC.<sup>6</sup> This forced displacement disrupted their livelihoods, hindered access to food and water sources, and caused significant social and economic hardship.

Green Fuel's significant capital investment in the ethanol plant and associated infrastructure prompted the CRDC to revitalise dormant urbanisation plans initially proposed during the late colonial period. In November 1968, the rogue Rhodesian state set up a quasi-state rural development agency known as the Tribal Trust Land Development Corporation (Tilcor for short), charged with "bringing about [the] economic development of Rhodesia's tribal [rural] areas."<sup>7</sup> Tilcor devised a Growth Point Policy around which profitable development ventures could emerge from exploiting agricultural resources for export to the major urban centres. In Chipinge, Tilcor earmarked land in Chisumbanje for a growth point and invested up to R\$8 million in its development by

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 J. Wack, *In the beginning...: The Chisumbanje Story* (1973: TILCOR), 1.

the early 1970s.<sup>8</sup> However, the intensification of the liberation war from around 1976 disrupted these plans.

The Transitional National Development Plan (TNDP) of 1982 revived Tilcor's high-modernist vision for the rural areas of Zimbabwe in the post-independence period. The TNDP wanted to transform rural service and business centres into vibrant economic hubs for rural development. The plan specifically gazetted 1,055 hectares of land in Checheche for a Growth Point.<sup>9</sup> The results were nonetheless poor owing to, among other reasons, inadequate infrastructure, lack of investment, and limited market access. Despite these lessons, Zimbabwe's grandiose National Development Strategy (NDS) 1 for 2021–2025, issued in November 2020, still regurgitated the same high-modernist strategies around growth points and rural service centres as the panacea to rural development.<sup>10</sup> However, this time round, the government felt that Green Fuel's investments would lead to the natural growth of urban complexes. Blessing Mamvosha, the CEO of the CRDC, explained:

The coming of Green Fuel's ethanol plant at Chisumbanje made everyone excited, and we had to plan a new Checheche. [The new plan was that] by [the] end of [the] day, the old and new Checheche 'city' shall be 2,203ha in total.<sup>11</sup>

The district's urbanisation plan aims to transform communal land into urban areas, yet lacks adequate consultation with the affected

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8 Whitsun Foundation, *Rural Service Centres Development Study* (Salisbury 1980: Whitsun Foundation).

9 P. Zamchiya, O. Dhlwayo, C. Gwenzi & C. Madhuku, *The 'silent' dispossession of customary land rights holders for urban development in Zimbabwe* (2021: Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies), 1.

10 Government of Zimbabwe (2020) 'Towards a prosperous and empowered upper middle-income society by 2030,' National Development Strategy 1, January 2021–December 2025, Harare, Government Printers.

11 B. Mamvosha (CEO of CRDC), quoted in Zamchiya et al., *The 'silent' dispossession of customary land rights holders for urban development in Zimbabwe*, 1.

communities. The CRDC, through the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, and Rural Resettlement, issued eviction notices to numerous families in several rural wards in Chipinge. The notices stated that:

You are hereby given 90 days' notice to vacate State Land, Chipinge District, Manicaland Province. You are violating section 3 of the Gazetted Land Act (Consequential Provisions) Act ... Failure to vacate on or before this date will result in your arrest or prosecution in terms of the Gazetted Land Act.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, the Department of Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services (Agritex) officers in the crops and livestock division, whose sole mandate was to train rural smallholders on agricultural-related issues, handed out some of these eviction notices. The appropriation of land traditionally used for agriculture and grazing undermines many families' livelihoods. Beyond this, the foreboding of possible eviction also disrupts productivity because of the uncertainty it creates.

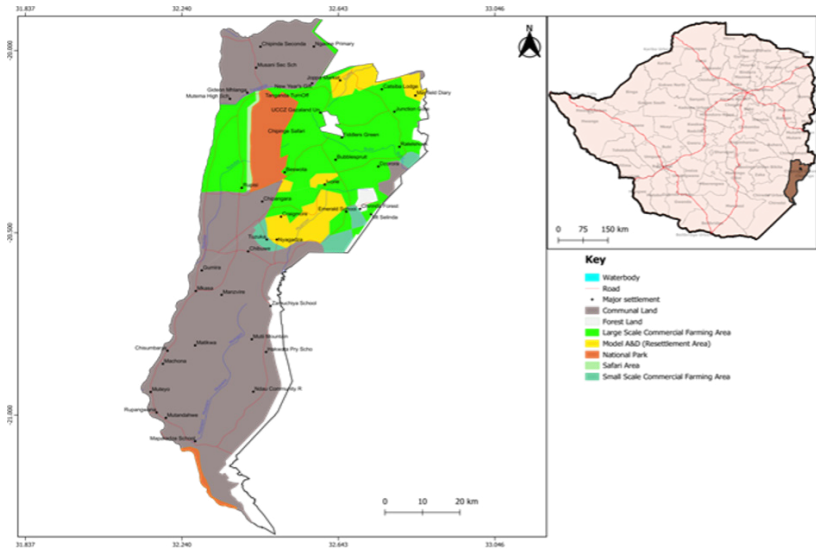
The Zimbabwean government uses the country's convoluted land tenure system to evict communal smallholders. The country's tenure structure includes state land, resettlement land under the Fast Track Land Reform Program, communal and state-owned gazetted forests (run by the Zimbabwe National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority and the Forestry Commission), and rural district council areas.<sup>13</sup> The government's default policy has been

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12 Extract from Notice of Eviction issued on 24 May 2019.

13 See: M. O'Flaherty, "Communal tenure in Zimbabwe: Divergent models of collective land holding in the communal areas," *Africa* 68, no. 4 (1998): 537–557; H.M. Jacobs & C. Chavunduka, "Devolution for land administration in Zimbabwe: Opportunities and challenges," paper for the project "Delivering land and securing rural livelihoods: Post-independence land reform and resettlement in Zimbabwe" (University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe and University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States, 2003). Accessible here: [https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/22025/79\\_sym4.pdf](https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/22025/79_sym4.pdf).

to gazette or de-gazette communal lands for national strategic importance through the Minister of Land Administration. Once the government designates communal lands as of “strategic importance,” smallholders face limited options for land retention.



Map 1: Chipinge District. Map drawn by Hardlife Muhoyi using QGIS.

The legal landscape surrounding land rights in Chipinge is fraught with challenges. However, while there have been victories in court for communities like Kondo, which successfully opposed the CRDC’s urbanisation plans, scepticism remains about their sustainability because of potential political interference and the ongoing threat of dispossession.<sup>14</sup> The communities fear that political elites, rather than social equity considerations, may influence decisions in land disputes, complicating resolution

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14 PLAAS, “Zimbabwe court victory over land rights may be short-lived,” PLAAS, 31 October 2022. Accessible here: <https://plaas.org.za/zimbabwevictory/> (DOA: 28 November 2024).

efforts.<sup>15</sup> The perception that land disputes are politically motivated adds complexity to the situation. Likewise, the legal battles highlight the intersection of environmental issues with governance failures in managing land resources.

### **The Impact of Climate Change on Chipinge**

Like many African nations, Zimbabwe is grappling with the effects of climate change, most notably seen through erratic weather patterns and flooding that increasingly threaten the country. Zimbabwe ranks as one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change due to its high poverty levels and overreliance on agriculture. Recurrent droughts and unpredictable rainfall patterns severely impact agricultural production and rural livelihoods. Limited resources, weak infrastructure, and a history of land degradation amplify the country's vulnerability.

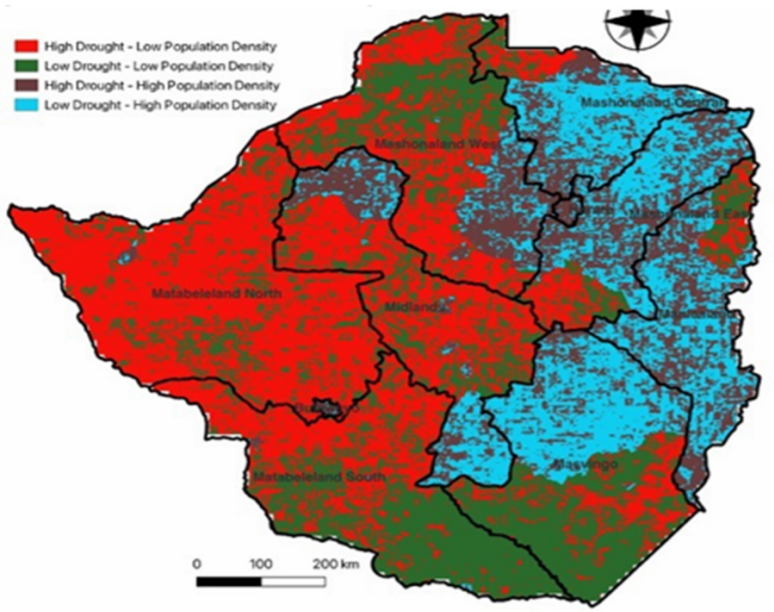
In Chipinge, communities face significant socioeconomic disruptions because of climate change, including loss of livelihoods and food security. Competition for land has intensified as families seek to secure their survival. Recent El Niño-induced droughts have resulted in prolonged periods of dry weather, leading to severe water scarcity and impacting agricultural production. Climate change has, therefore, magnified the vulnerability of Chipinge's rural communities, which were already struggling with limited resources and access to infrastructure. This has increased food insecurity, malnutrition, and displacement, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions and climate change adaptation strategies.

The unpredictable rainfall and prolonged droughts severely affected crop yields in Chipinge, causing many families to face heightened economic insecurity. Guthiga et al. estimate the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

district’s maize forecast would fall by 64% from 50404 MT in 2023 to just 17916 MT in 2024.<sup>16</sup> Farmers struggled to cope with these challenges, with many experiencing crop failures and significant financial losses. Rising costs associated with obtaining residential stands and land allocation fees imposed by traditional leaders and the CRDC compounded this vulnerability. As families struggled to secure affordable housing amid these economic pressures, conflicts over land became more pronounced, with marginalised groups often bearing the brunt of these challenges.



Map 2: Zimbabwe Drought Exposure (2024)<sup>17</sup>

16 P.M. Guthiga, K. Dia & A. Ndoye, Impacts of El-Niño–Induced Drought in Zimbabwe, El-Niño 2024 in Southern Africa Series, no. 02 (Kigali 2024: AKADEMIYA2063), 4. Accessible here: <https://doi.org/10.54067/elnino2024insas.02>.

17 Map source: *ibid.*



## The Interplay of Climate Change and Land Governance

Climate change significantly exacerbates land conflicts in Chipinge, intertwining with land governance challenges to create a complex landscape of disputes. As communities face these agricultural and ecological challenges, they become increasingly vulnerable to displacement, further igniting conflicts over land ownership and usage rights. Because smallholder communities rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods, diminishing yields owing to climate effects and land dispossession intensified competition for arable land. The scarcity of arable land escalated tensions between local communities and authorities, primarily as the CRDC's urbanisation plans encroached on communal lands vital for farming and food security. The rising costs associated with land allocation further exacerbated poverty as families struggled to secure affordable housing while facing pressures from traditional leaders profiting from land sales.<sup>18</sup>

Local populations, particularly women who face specific land access challenges and often experience marginalisation in allocation processes, bear profound socioeconomic implications from these conflicts.<sup>19</sup> Many families became homeless or resorted to unstable, precarious, non-agricultural, or informal livelihoods. The financial burden associated with rising housing costs and land allocation further marginalised these communities, making them more susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change. Some of my informants expressed resentment toward their traditional leaders, who they perceived to be exploiting these tensions to charge high fees for land allocations. Further, the Chipinge communities' perception that political elites benefit from land

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18 Platform for Youth and Community Development Trust (PYCD), *Greediness Haunts Chipinge Villagers*, 5 October 2018. Accessible here: <https://kubatana.net/2018/10/05/greediness-haunts-chipinge-villagers/> (DOA: 30 November 2024).

19 PLAAS, "Zimbabwe court victory over land rights may be short-lived."

dispossession while the local population suffers fuels social discord and complicates efforts to resolve conflicts amicably.

Therefore, climate change has a multiplier effect as it intensifies the challenges posed by land governance issues. Drought, unpredictable rainfall, and land dispossession pose a dual challenge for rural communities. As climate change worsens, these communities' ability to sustain their livelihoods diminishes, leading to increased migration and social instability. For that reason, the governance structures responsible for managing land conflicts must tackle the underlying issues exacerbated by climate change. This interplay between climate change and land governance highlights the need for integrated policies that address environmental sustainability and equitable land management to support the resilience of rural communities in Chipinge. The rural communities in Chipinge have responded to these exertions through migration, among other coping mechanisms.

### **Migration as a Coping Mechanism**

Migration emerged as a central coping mechanism for residents facing the combined pressures of climate change and land grabs in Chipinge. It allowed individuals to escape the immediate effects of drought, land dispossession, and limited livelihood opportunities. This initial response often involved a move to nearby towns or rural areas with access to resources, seeking temporary employment or assistance from family members.

I interviewed dispossessed villagers in Chinyamukwaka, who had previously farmed on the land Green Fuel seized for their sugarcane plantation. The land grabs heavily impacted this community, forcing many residents to relocate to neighbouring wards and resettle around rural business centres, such as Kondo, seeking alternative livelihoods. Chinyamukwaka is a critical case study for understanding the immediate consequences of land

dispossession in rural communities. The interviews in this village provide insights into the challenges those directly displaced face and their strategies to cope with these changes.

When the immediate coping mechanisms proved insufficient and the land conflict prolonged, residents sought opportunities in urban centres beyond Chipinge. These destinations typically offered comparatively better economic stability and access to essential services but presented challenges like job competition, higher living costs, and social integration. Many migrated to urban areas such as Mutare, Harare, and other cities. Internal migration, particularly seasonal movements, allows individuals to seek temporary employment elsewhere while maintaining ties to their home communities. This form of migration helps diversify income sources and reduce immediate consumption needs during agricultural stress.

Aside from internal migration, some residents of Chipinge also moved to neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa. The need for work drives this migration, with many residents seeking employment in industries such as mining, agriculture, and service sectors across the border. For many families who have moved to urban centres or abroad, remittances have become an essential source of income. These remittances help sustain families back in Chipinge, where access to land and the means to earn a living remain limited.

The need for pastoralists to access grazing resources and water, arising from climate change and land dispossession, drives significant transhumance between the Chipinge district in Zimbabwe and Mozambique.<sup>20</sup> This traditional pastoral practice allows herders to adapt to varying climatic conditions and

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20 E. Mavhura, D. Manatsa & M. Matiashe, "Adapting smallholder farming to climate change and variability: Household strategies and challenges in Chipinge district, Zimbabwe," *Climate Change*, 3, no. 12 (2017), 903-913. Accessible here: [https://www.discoveryjournals.org/climate\\_change/current\\_issue/v3/n12/A5.pdf](https://www.discoveryjournals.org/climate_change/current_issue/v3/n12/A5.pdf)

resource availability across borders.<sup>21</sup> During dry seasons or periods of resource scarcity, herders often move their livestock across borders in search of better grazing lands.<sup>22</sup> The porous nature of the Zimbabwe–Mozambique border facilitates a high level of social integration among communities on both sides. Many families have established ties through marriage and kinship, leading to a shared cultural identity that transcends national boundaries. This integration supports continued transhumance practices as communities rely on each other for resources.<sup>23</sup>

The migration trends have led to demographic shifts in Chipinge, with rural depopulation in some areas and the growth of towns as people move in search of better livelihoods. This shift has altered traditional social structures, and younger generations are often less engaged in agricultural work. While migration has relieved some families, the continued land dispossession and lack of sustainable agricultural opportunities have left the district vulnerable to food insecurity, poverty, and underdevelopment. The remaining people often struggle to maintain traditional farming practices due to a lack of resources and economic instability.

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21 GIZ, “Promoting Peaceful Transhumance,” GIZ, June 2023. Accessible here: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/126936.html> (DOA: 3 December 2024).

22 Owen Mangiza & Joshua Chakawa, “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on border communities: the case of Chipinge, Zimbabwe,” *Conflict & Resilience Monitor*, 18 December 2020. Accessible here: <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-border-communities-the-case-of-chipinge-zimbabwe/> (DOA: 3 December 2024). See also Chipinge District Civil Protection Committee, *Assessment Report on Mozambican Influx into Chipinge District, Zimbabwe*, October 2016. Accessible here: <https://data.unhcr.org/es/documents/download/52449> (DOA: 3 December 2024).

23 Mangiza & Chakawa, “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on border communities.”

## Conclusion

Climate change in Chipinge emerges as both the primary driver of land conflicts and a multiplier of the ramifications arising from land dispossession. Climate change and the attendant resource scarcity, as seen in the global food price crises of 2007–2008, drove governments and private capital into land deals, displacing and dislocating rural livelihoods in Chipinge and other parts of Africa. The land deals made it easier to evict smallholders from their land by privatising rural communal land, increasing the economic and social vulnerability of those evicted. The land grabs exacerbated residents' already pressing challenges due to climate change.

Despite the adverse effects on local livelihoods and food security, local authorities often justify land dispossession under the guise of development. Local authorities in Chipinge frequently prioritise urbanisation and development projects over community rights, resulting in land conflicts. However, the promise of economic benefits from such projects does not compensate for losing land and traditional rights. Decisions about land use usually reflect the interests of political elites rather than the needs of vulnerable communities.

The combination of land dispossession and the slow violence of climate change created a complex landscape where migration became a necessary response for survival. Put differently, climate change and land grabbing influenced migration patterns in Chipinge by disrupting livelihoods and forcing communities to adapt through movement. Climate change complicates resource access, compelling individuals to relocate due to the privatisation of their land, thereby heightening their vulnerability and exacerbating social tensions stemming from poor land governance. However, migration tends to provide a fleeting reprieve, as the livelihood strategy is often precarious.



# Responding to the Social, Political, and Ecological Crisis

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*By Prioritising Migrant  
and Disability Justice*

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Rebecca Yeo

**W**e are at a time of multiple interconnected and unprecedented crises. Around the world, extreme weather events and resource scarcity are costing lives, creating new impairments and forcing people to migrate to safer areas if possible. It is clear that people living in precarious conditions face increased imminent danger from the climate crisis, but response to *future* risk is hindered if people are unable to meet *immediate* needs. In Britain, successive governments frame disabled people and racialised migrant communities as if an economic burden, the cost of which should be reduced by cutting services and support. The result is that people's

lives become reduced to struggles for survival. The disabled people's movement has argued for decades that it is disabling when people are denied access to the services and support necessary to meet human needs. For people seeking asylum, the conditions that caused people to flee their homes, as well as often hazardous journeys and the restrictions imposed on people in the UK, all compound the disabling impact of the migration process. If we are to address these injustices, it is necessary to understand the interconnections, to explore how insights from one sector could be adapted and applied to another, and to consider alternative ways of organising society.

### **The interconnections of current injustice**

Before considering the relevance of the disabled people's movement in responding to a disabling situation, it is necessary to consider the nature of current crises in more detail.

#### ***The disabling impact of asylum and immigration policy***

The UK asylum and immigration system is deliberately designed to restrict access to services and support. The UK prisons watchdog recently described conditions in an immigration detention centre as the worst he had ever seen.<sup>1</sup> Almost half of detainees spoke of suicidal intentions. Meanwhile, Doctors of the World report that over 74% of people experience severe mental distress at Wethersfield, a former military camp now used as an accommodation centre.<sup>2</sup> People seeking asylum often live in

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1 Becky Johnson, 'Prisons watchdog describes "worst conditions ever seen" at west London immigration detention centre', *Sky News*, 9 July 2024. Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/amp/prisons-watchdog-describes-worst-conditions-ever-seen-at-west-london-immigration-detention-centre-13175362>.

2 Doctors of the World and Médecins Sans Frontières, *"Like a Prison: No Control, no Sleep": Mental Health Crisis at Wethersfield Containment*, briefing note,



a state of fear, not knowing how to meet immediate needs and aware that they could be detained and deported. This inevitably affects mental and physical health. As one person seeking asylum explained: 'If they are torturing someone, they can't expect that person to be okay'.<sup>3</sup> Mental distress is so pervasive in the asylum system as to be widely considered to be normal. As another person explained:

this mental you know... it has been brought by the problems ... I'm taking medication for mental but ... If the things are better, I think all can be well.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that highlighting the hostile impact of current policies is futile if that is the purpose. The disabling impact of the immigration and asylum system is *not* the result of an unpredictable epidemic. It is the result of deliberate government policies, designed to reduce the apparent threat of people seeking sanctuary in the UK. It may be argued that Keir Starmer has a different approach to his predecessors. While previous governments adopted the slogan 'Stop the Boats' to promote their policies to prevent people from arriving in the UK, Starmer uses the slogan 'Smash the Gangs'. He speaks of the need for anti-terrorist policies to prevent 'people smugglers' from helping others get to the UK. Such government approaches are reinforced by the mainstream media. If migrants are perceived as a threat, then concern for the needs of people seeking safety becomes replaced by fear and hostility.

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May 2024. Available at: [https://msf.org.uk/sites/default/files/MSF\\_DOTW\\_Wethersfield\\_Briefing\\_Note.pdf](https://msf.org.uk/sites/default/files/MSF_DOTW_Wethersfield_Briefing_Note.pdf)

3 Cited in Rebecca Yeo, *Disabling Migration Controls: Shared Learning, Solidarity, and Collective Resistance* (Abingdon 2024: Routledge), 25. Available at: [https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003362067/disabling-migration-controls-rebecca-yeo?\\_ga=undefined](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003362067/disabling-migration-controls-rebecca-yeo?_ga=undefined)

4 Ibid.

### ***Disabled people's response to the climate crisis***

The result of framing migration as a threat is that the prospect of increased numbers of people fleeing climate breakdown reinforces demands for border security, while obscuring the causes of both migration and the ecological crisis. In this context, the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on people who are already marginalised, including migrants and disabled people, becomes framed as if inevitable and insurmountable. In contrast, the Sensing Climate project, led by Sarah Bell at the University of Exeter, explores the perspectives and insights of disabled people in relation to the climate crisis. As part of this project, artist Andrew Bolton worked with other disabled people to create a mural showing what people would like others to understand about the changes that are needed.<sup>5</sup> The mural shows that the climate crisis cannot be addressed in isolation from military destruction. As one research contributor explained, there appears to be limitless amounts of money for weapons, while we are told that there is not enough money for the services and support needed to create a caring, sustainable society. The scale of the climate emergency cannot be addressed by individual carbon reduction without addressing the human and ecological destruction caused by military action.

Alongside the weapons in the mural, figures from the game of Monopoly rush with their money bags towards a rocket. Disabled people contributing to the mural spoke of how the superrich may plan to avoid the worst effects of climate catastrophe by escaping to a different planet. A wheelchair user and a blind man are trying, but not managing, to keep up with the rushing capitalist Monopoly figures. In any case, the rocket is inaccessible, with steps leading up to the door.

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5 Rebecca Yeo and Sarah Bell, 'Sensing Climate Mural in Bristol', *Sensing Climate*, June 2024. Available at: <https://sensing-climate.com/news/sensing-climate-mural-bristol-june-2024>.



Figure 1: *Sensing Climate* mural by disabled people in Bristol, led by Andrew Bolton. Image by Mark Simmons.

The key message is not only that capitalism, with its never-ending search for profit, is a key cause of the climate crisis but also that if people are valued according to their economic productivity many disabled people will inevitably be disadvantaged. In this context, some disabled people may try to be included and to keep up with the mainstream agenda but for many that is not possible. More specifically, the climate crisis cannot be addressed by *including* disabled people on the path to catastrophe.

### **Alternative ways of responding to injustice**

In hegemonic discourse, struggles of marginalised people against oppression have become widely distorted into calls for inclusion. Yet, as US disability activist Mia Mingus explained:

I am done with disability simply being “included”... We don’t simply want to join the ranks of the privileged, we want to challenge and dismantle those ranks.<sup>6</sup>

6 Mia Mingus, ‘Access Intimacy: The Missing Link’, *Leaving Evidence*, May 2011. Accessible at: <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>



*Figure 2: Detail of the Climate Sensing mural. Image by Mark Simmons..*

This is not to suggest that inclusion is never a useful goal, but it is always necessary to question in which agenda inclusion is sought and for what purpose. To return to the issue of immigration policy, at present, some detention or accommodation sites are inaccessible to disabled people. The detrimental impact of housing people on the ‘Bibby Stockholm’ barge has been widely acknowledged. Like many detention centres, the barge is clearly inaccessible to some disabled people. This highlights an essential point: improving the access and inclusion of disabled people in these centres would not build greater justice.

Inclusion in a destructive or oppressive system is no solution to injustice. Inclusion in the existing agenda is, however, not the only option. As disability activist and author Ellen Clifford argues:

We must raise awareness that an alternative is possible – one with different forms of human relationships, personal

development, and interdependency that we cannot even imagine from the constraints of our current position.<sup>7</sup>

At the start of the Sensing Climate project, a wheelchair user explained that there are many paths that lead from A to B but asked: what if we want to go somewhere else?

If we want to go somewhere else, we need new paths. The mural therefore shows an alternative path. Below the scenes of desolation, disabled people and allies are portrayed helping each other onto a new path going in the opposite direction from the capitalist Monopoly figures. On the left there are images of flourishing trees, green meadows and a beautiful blue pool of water. The interconnected roots of a tree spell the word 'care'. We cannot create a world of care for each other and planet by continuing the destructive race to the rocket.

In the context of such acute interconnected struggles, the level of change that is needed may appear impossible. New approaches are clearly needed.

### ***Insights from the disabled people's movement***

Bringing together the insights, achievements and struggles of the disabled people's movement with wider struggles for justice may help build transformative ways of organising society. In hostile and inaccessible societies, many disabled people have no choice but to develop alternative ways of living. The disabled people's movement may therefore have particularly important insights for building justice for all. This is not to suggest that there is something glorious about the pain and struggles faced by many disabled people. Yet when asked what is learned from being disabled, people contributing to the Sensing Climate research spoke of:

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7 Ellen Clifford, *The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare and the Making of a Human Catastrophe* (London 2020: Zed Books), 303–304.

- empathy,
- care,
- solidarity,
- the need for rest,
- alternative ways of surviving,
- organising to address everyone's needs.

These lessons are all highly relevant to building climate justice. However, if disabled people are struggling to meet immediate needs, then the prospect of climatic catastrophe is irrelevant to surviving today. John Pring exposes how hundreds of disabled people have died after having support removed by the Department for Work and Pensions.<sup>8</sup> Rather than pledging to change this, Rachel Reeves, Chancellor of the Exchequer, has spoken of her aim to reduce spending on services and support for disabled people in order to boost spending on wider public services.<sup>9</sup> This explicit blaming of disabled people, like the blaming of migrants, encourages fascist scapegoating of people who are already struggling.

Perhaps the key demand of the disabled people's movement is: 'Nothing about us without us'. If, as has been argued, the experience of marginalisation brings pertinent insights, then this is particularly important. As disabled sociologist Michael Oliver explained, non-disabled people almost invariably 'get it wrong'.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Mikaela Loach argues that recognising the expertise gained through lived experience of injustice, should not involve adding to people's burden by insisting that marginalised people

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8 John Pring, *The Department: How a Violent Government Bureaucracy Killed Hundreds and Hid the Evidence* (London 2024: Pluto Press).

9 Millie Cooke, 'Rachel Reeves to push forward with £3bn sickness benefits cut in Budget. Charities warned cuts proposed by the Tories would have a 'devastating impact' on disabled people', *Independent*, 18 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/budget-2024-benefits-dwp-rachel-reeves-b2631447.html>

10 Michael Oliver, 'The social model of disability: Thirty years on', *Disability & Society* 28, no. 7 (2013): 1024-1026.

take leading responsibility for building justice.<sup>11</sup> Instead, increasing solidarity could be a means to reduce immediate struggles while also providing the means to share and develop new approaches.

On a practical level, when working well, organisations of disabled people routinely pay attention to addressing access barriers. These approaches ensure that attention is paid to the perspectives of people who are ignored by wider society. Similarly, in migrant justice work, it is routine to seek to address the barriers caused by immigration restrictions. Bringing together movements for migration, disability and climate justice could increase awareness of the practices of each sector.

In addition to practical methods, the conceptual insights of the disabled people's movement provide relevant perspectives to wider struggles. The social model of disability was developed in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s to focus on the socially constructed causes of the disadvantages faced by disabled people. The original social model has been widely coopted and reduced to simply focus on the access barriers preventing inclusion in business as usual. But the original social model called for systemic change and was anti-capitalist.<sup>12</sup> Whether or not they are also disabled, many people fleeing their homes are also disadvantaged by a system

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11 Mikaela Loach, *It's Not That Radical: Climate Action to Transform Our World* (London 2024: Dorling Kindersley).

12 See for example: UPIAS, *Are We Oppressed? Collected contributions from early UPIAS circulars* (Manchester 2018 [1974]: Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation), available at: <https://tonybaldwinson.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/are-we-oppressed-vic-finkelstein-upias-1974-2018-isbn-9780993526749.pdf> (Accessed 11 July 2020); Michael Oliver, 'A new model of the social work role in relation to disability', in: J. Campling (ed.), *The handicapped person: A new perspective for social workers* (London 1981: RADAR): 19–32; Michael Oliver, 'The individual and social models of disability', conference paper (1990), accessible at: [www.disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Oliver-in-soc-dis.pdf](http://www.disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Oliver-in-soc-dis.pdf); Vic Finkelstein, 'The social model of disability repossessed', *Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People*, 1 December 2001, accessible at: <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/finkelstein-soc-mod-repossessed.pdf>.

that values people according to economic contribution. The need for systemic change is essential to disability justice and to migrant justice. The climate crisis simply makes this need existential for all humanity.

## **Conclusion**

The urgency of learning from each other cannot be exaggerated. The multiple crises we face today are interconnected. If we are to maximise our capacity for future survival as a species, we also need to address immediate injustice. The scale of change that is needed may appear too ambitious; however, as Clifford writes: 'We have no choice. The stakes have become too high.'<sup>13</sup> Together we can and must create a different world based on justice, caring for each other and for the planet.

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13 Clifford, *The War on Disabled People*, 300.



# Of House and Immigrants

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Theresa Audrey O. Esteban

Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus' som'thin' that was his. Som'thin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off of it.

– John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*

**I**t was the middle of March when our research team was requested to host a session in two weeks for a conference to be attended by people in the government and private sector. This request came at a busy time, when we were also co-organizing a workshop with the Municipality of Rotterdam. We thought maybe we could propose the “pre-packaged” workshop from the small project I am running. Excited for

the prospect of conducting a workshop that uses reflective methods for this type of audience I began writing the session proposal. A week before the conference I received an email saying that it was not the kind of workshop they wanted. A phone call ensued in which I was told that the attendees were paying participants and were of a “high level”. I responded by saying I had done this workshop for the Dutch Enterprise Agency, which was attended by the Dutch Water Envoy, who appreciated this method. To cut the story short, I gave up. I was frustrated and it was exactly that frustration that led me to write a 500-word abstract in one sitting and send it to ISRF to apply to be part of the “Migration and Climate Change” conference long before the call-for-papers deadline.

Fast forward to the ISRF conference, I presented my “transdisciplinary” research project on Rotterdam, which I started back when I was doing my PhD but has since evolved to encompass the neighbourhoods south of the city. I am not a migration scholar, to begin with; I am an urban planner. However, issues surrounding area developments in this part of the city are more than just designing a climate-adaptive infrastructure. The story of the immigrants who compose 75% of the population of five neighbourhoods in the south is a story that needs telling.

### **The immigrants, the port, and the growth of the south**

During World War II, Rotterdam was heavily bombed, destroying over 80% of its infrastructure. The city administration rapidly devised reconstruction plans, and in 1946, after the war had ended, the so-called Basic Plan was developed and implemented. This plan aimed to reconstruct and restructure the city’s central and port areas. During the period of economic growth between 1960 to 1970, the *Nieuwe Bouwen*, or Modern Movement in architecture, a sober style that emphasised functionality and angular shapes, dominated the city. Its modern architecture became a statement

both of the city's ability to recover and of its power, true to Rotterdam's adage *'sterker door strijd'*. Struggle renders both the city and its people stronger—or does it?

The period of economic growth enabled the city and the national government to expand the port to Botlek and Europoort. However, there was a labour shortage, so the Dutch government had to recruit what it called 'guest workers' to work at the port. Guest workers from Spain, Italy, Cabo Verde, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Morocco, and Turkey topped the bill. As the port further expanded towards the sea, the longer port workers stayed in the country.

The story of immigration did not start during this period. The port has always been an attractive place for trading and settlement since the fourteenth century. Rich merchants from France, England, and Ireland established their trading posts in Rotterdam, while domestic workers from Germany came in to work at the docks. But it was the influx of guest workers in the 50s, 60s, and 70s that made the immigrants "visible," not least because, in racial terms, they stood out more from the majority population.

### **Visible tensions, housing as a catalyst**

To meet the housing demands the original port area Feijenoord transformed into a low-cost housing area which expanded to the neighbourhoods of Afrikaanderwijk, Hillesluis, and Bloemhof. Mass housing was constructed in these areas to meet this housing demand in the 1960s. But the growth of the population over the years due to several factors such as family reunifications and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when labour migrants from Eastern Europe entered the country, most of whom were housed in Rotterdam, put pressure on the housing sector.

Because of the housing demand and also the poor housing conditions for some harbour workers, a riot erupted in

Afrikaanderwijk in 1972 when Turkish landlords established pension houses for Turkish labourers. This riot lasted several days and prompted the Rotterdam City Council to implement a cap of only 5% of migrants in each neighbourhood. While this policy failed to be implemented because of its unconstitutionality it was a clear first attempt to distribute and divide the population of migrant workers. In 1978 Rotterdam enacted an integration policy, the first in the Netherlands, to improve immigrants' social and economic conditions. Several national integration policies ensued in 1980, 1990, and 2002.

While these tensions arose in Rotterdam's south, the city centre and north were being renewed, developed, and regenerated, fostering the city's ambitions for development and prosperity, as well as the creation of a knowledge society. This signalled a move away from the blue-collar image of 'roll up your sleeves; major works lie before us'.

Two events in 1990s coalesced to make a perfect storm, both literally and figuratively: the rising popularity of the right-wing populist party *Leefbaar Rotterdam*; and major flood events in 1993 and 1995 (near-flood events), and 1998 (pluvial flooding). The former set the direction of the development in Rotterdam South, while the latter set the direction of the environmental policies both at the national and local levels. The latter also helped in strengthening and improving research on climate change.

*Leefbaar Rotterdam*'s flag bearer, Pim Fortuyn, openly criticized what he called a blight in local neighbourhoods, directly implying immigrants are the cause, and claiming there was a need to stop more immigrants from coming to the country. The party won the 2002 municipal elections, shortly after which Fortuyn was assassinated. Party members who took over from Fortuyn continued with his anti-immigrant rhetoric, although this did not sit well with the other parties of Rotterdam. What did was the perceived need to limit the number of disadvantaged households

in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. And thus the Rotterdam Act was born.

### **Extraordinary, exclusionary, liveability**

The Rotterdam Act—formally, The Act on Extraordinary Measures for Urban Problems—was a national policy approved in 2003 and implemented in 2006 with the goal of preventing the concentration of ‘disadvantaged’ people in already-disadvantaged districts. Oud Charlois, Carnisse, Tarwewijk, Bloemhof, and Hillesluis are examples of ‘opportunity zones’ in Rotterdam that were initially targeted. The Act had three particular exclusionary measures: Article 8, nature of income, focussed on whether individuals are employed or not, and whether they are on welfare; Article 9, socioeconomic characteristics, measured whether individuals work in the city’s priority professions, such as medical services, police, or teachers; and Article 10, disruptive and criminal behaviour, focussed on whether individuals have or are suspected of having shown disruptive or criminal behaviour. As a result, any individual or household that does not match these conditions had their ‘opportunity’ to live in these ‘opportunity zones’ withdrawn.

Currently, immigrants or people with immigrant backgrounds account for 75% of the population in these five neighbourhoods. The average annual household income in the five neighbourhoods is €20,000. Homeownership is similarly low. The average percentage of rental properties in the neighbourhoods is 75%. These are mostly owned by housing corporations who provide social housing to the residents.

On top of this, the neighbourhoods have a problem with the urban heat island effect where the neighbourhoods experience up to 45 Celsius temperatures (or over) in summer months. The areas also suffer from land subsidence, with houses built on wooden poles and those without a foundation in desperate need of repair.

The combination of heat and drought affects the land and the wooden poles supporting most of the old houses, while land subsidence threatens the stability of the poles and the overall integrity of the houses. There is an urgent need to make these areas climate-adaptive.

However, the cost of renovation is way higher than it would be to demolish and rebuild. Some housing blocks in these areas have now been demolished to make room for new ones. These developments are part of the Nationaal Programma Rotterdam Zuid to transform the area into a more liveable neighbourhood. This programme is also informed by the Rotterdam Act. Most of the new developments are priced on average at €400,000 per apartment. This makes me question how the current population in these neighbourhoods can afford these apartments. Because with a €20,000 euro annual income, who can afford a €400,000 apartment? Should they, being long-time residents of the area, not be the ones benefitting from these developments and liveability measures? It seems that exclusion continues only now it is framed as climate change adaptation policies and urban development.

### **Technocracy and transdisciplinarity**

Even today, many research projects that claim to be transdisciplinary still rely heavily on technocratic approaches that have long been at the foundation of urban planning and climate change strategies, rendering inequality invisible and generating false consciousness. Presenting and walking around in front a roomful of technocrats and capitalists, the so-called 'high-level' participants I mentioned earlier, asking whether property value will increase or decrease if a road is elevated to adapt or mitigate flooding, presents an appearance of a superficial comprehension of the situation. In fact, with that query, one can simply look to the Global South, where this has been done, as well as how many individual well-off households in the Global South have elevated

their own homes as a local adaptation measure. Have the property values in these frequently flooded neighbourhoods in the Global South increased? Yes, incrementally, and this is due to rising demand for houses, unless the government imposes a cap, which may be difficult to achieve with privately owned residences that can take advantage of the market value.

I am not saying that we should abandon transdisciplinarity but rather that there is a need to be more reflective about one's approach. This cannot be achieved by merely coming up with a solution to a perceived problem. Transdisciplinary projects (research or otherwise) can only truly contribute to meaningful scientific outcomes and discourses on climate and social justice if research projects are led with a deeper understanding of the intersectionalities present in urban development and climate change.





# 'Migrants Have Been Beaten, Hounded by Dogs and Burned with Cigarettes'

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*On the Frontline of the Poland-Belarus Border Crisis*

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Joanna Klimowicz

Biographical Information

**U**nidentified bodies lying in the woods. Border guards beating and robbing refugees. Families loaded into the back of lorries and transported across borders, their fates unknown. These scenes might be more commonly associated with the atrocities carried out during the Second World War, but this is not the case in this instance. What I'm

**referring to is a systematic breach of human rights which is being perpetrated in the heart of Europe during the 21st century.**

I've covered the humanitarian crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus for more than three years, starting in the summer of 2021 when I was working for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a major opinion-making newspaper. In July of that year, we first noticed families trekking through the woods with their luggage, many carrying suitcases and wearing flip flops. This terrain isn't easy to traverse at any time of year and these people weren't prepared for what was ahead of them – they'd trusted human traffickers who told them it'd be easy to make it over the border, to safely enter Europe, to travel on and be reunited with their families in Germany, passing together beneath the Brandenburg Gate.

This is part of a campaign of hybrid warfare initiated by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, with the assistance of Russia. The aim: to destabilise the European Union, creating pressure by artificially generating migration, turning desperate people who are looking for a safe life into weapons. Belarus encourages those who'd otherwise find it difficult or impossible to get a visa to come to Minsk by plane. Once in Belarus, they're taken to the border and allowed to travel into Poland. When they reach the "death strip" – the forested borderland between the barbed wire of Belarus and Poland – their fate is no longer in their own hands. This operation was launched in response to EU sanctions imposed on Belarus after the rigged presidential elections in 2020. It's also a business opportunity for Lukashenko. The journey to Europe costs up to several thousand US dollars. Whole families pool their resources in the hope of starting a better life in Europe, selling property and belongings, taking out loans.

Polish border guards caught migrants and refugees who managed to cross the border. No one questioned it: the borders needed to be protected. It seemed Poland was *helping* these refugees who

had travelled from Syria, Yemen, Iraq and were now requesting protection. It was assumed that procedure would be followed, they'd be placed in the relevant centre. Naively, we thought there were appropriate regulations in place, the Polish Constitution and international law as laid out in the Geneva Convention, and that these would be respected. But soon, we noticed these people weren't provided with food or having their wounds dressed. They were just put in the back of lorries, returned to the border and pushed back into Belarus. The Belarussians responded to these pushbacks with such cruelty. They've stolen money and belongings. Migrants have been beaten, hounded by dogs, burned with cigarettes, raped and pushed into Poland. There's been brutality on both sides of the border and, throughout the crisis, the violence has escalated.

The first time I realised the extent of the situation was three and a half years ago, around the time of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. I became aware of a group of around 32 people from Afghanistan, men, women, and children. There was a family with a grey pedigree cat which they'd taken with them on this perilous journey. This group was living on the border – refused entry into Poland and unable to return to Belarus. They were held in place by soldiers on either side, living under the rifle's barrel. For weeks, they stayed in the same place. It was cold at night, they didn't have access to food, water or medical supplies. They had to drink from a pond, though the women hardly drank at all, rather than experience this terrible humiliation in front of the men.

Agnieszka Holland's film *Green Border* dramatises the crisis and is largely based on the journalism of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, with some scenes directly mirroring reporting from the time. When I went to the border, I wasn't told how to cover this story, I was free to work on my own terms, collaborating with a photographer, Agnieszka Sadowska. We worked with dedication, often without sleep. At the time, no other local media outlets were present, with many journalists covering the situation using official statements

from the border guards, they didn't bother to dig into the story – as a profession, we didn't do very well. Our ability to hold the authorities to account was hindered due to a zone of exclusion which was established and remained in action until August 2022, prolonged illegally, in violation of the law and the Polish Constitution. As reporters, we faced the challenge of whether to enter this closed zone, risking punishment for doing so.

When someone else's health and life was involved, I made the decision to break the rules and enter this zone. First of all we are human beings and then we have our professional roles as journalists. Anyone who's experienced the situation at the border would realise that when human health or life is endangered you cannot stay objective, you forget about your professional role and just go and support the activists who are trying to reach those in need of help. We comforted refugees and migrants and we gave them hot tea, soup and a sandwich. Activists and journalists would remove their own clothes and give them to people who were soaked and couldn't move anymore because we were aware that in an hour we'd go back to a warm home and a shower, while a long and perilous journey awaited them. For me, there's no opposition between being a journalist and an activist because when I report what I see I verify the situation and pay due diligence. In my professional career of nearly 25 years, I've taken pride in being reliable and honest – I've never had a single court case against me.

We initially believed we could stand up to the border officials and help these people but it quickly turned out that this wasn't the case. I count myself lucky not to have been arrested, though many of my fellow journalists and activists have been. Photojournalists have been pushed to the ground, and had vulgarisms screamed at them. We've been persecuted by both law enforcement and politicians, we've been called Putin's servants and accused of participating in human trafficking. Going to the forest is unpredictable because the authorities make meaningful action so difficult. During one humanitarian intervention we spent six

hours in the cold with no internet access as the border guards interrogated activists and journalists. A team from a Franco-German television station Arte got lost while making a video, they entered the zone of exclusion by accident, were held for 24 hours and had to spend the night in jail. All of their equipment was taken and they were banned from returning. After taking the case to court, they were given compensation. However, these kinds of cases became more and more common and we began to lose our trust in the authorities. Still, I wanted to be a credible journalist, to hear both sides and to understand the perspective of the authorities. However, when I questioned the border guards, their answers were pure lies. I was told lies from national and local spokespeople. The most common one was that people who were pushed back didn't want to apply for international protection in Poland. Many times, I've seen people asking, begging, kissing the feet of the border guards and crying: "No Belarus! We want asylum in Poland" – but they are simply ignored.

September 2021, in front of the border guard station in the town of Michałowo, a group of around 20 Iraqi Kurds tried to resist the pushback, explaining why it'd be dangerous for them to return to Belarus and the fate which awaited them if they did; there were bodies in the woods, they didn't want their children to die there. There were nine children in the group, one was an infant in her overalls dirty from wandering through the woods, she wasn't even a year old. We made a video with them, my hope was that we could help make these pushbacks illegal. But eventually, they were returned. The horrible ping pong between Belarus and Poland continued.

There were others including Syrian refugees who were so tired they were almost frozen to death. One man was in the late stages of hypothermia. It was the first time in my life I'd seen someone dying in front of my eyes. Volunteer doctors arrived and administered fluids before wrapping him in a silver foil blanket to raise his body temperature. The group were taken to hospital. However, when

an ambulance is called, the border guards come too – and they don't seem to take into account anyone's situation. Only a few hours on from this extreme health crisis, they were all taken from the hospital and pushed back into Belarus, even the man who had been dying from hypothermia. I still find it difficult to believe that the Polish authorities are able to do such terrible things.

The most shocking moment for me was the death of a Kurdish woman, Avin Irfan Zahir. At 24 weeks pregnant, she'd come to the border with her family to try and find a better life. Because of the severe circumstances, the baby died inside her. She was suffering, her family contacted activists and an ambulance was called, but it was really late. After two weeks in hospital, she died. Her body was returned to Kurdistan and her unborn baby was placed in a tiny white coffin and buried in Poland. He was laid to rest next to other refugee graves in Bohoniki, a village known as the home of the minority Tatar community, which used to be popular with tourists before the crisis. There's an old Muslim cemetery there which has started to grow again with the graves of people who have died at the border and in the woods.

Journalists have been working with volunteer humanitarian emergency services to try and document the number of casualties. I've recorded more than 60 deaths at the border between Poland and Belarus. This figure rises to around 130 when the borders with Latvia and Lithuania are included, as in the EU-funded report on the crisis called *No Safe Passage*. There are unnamed bodies lying in the forest, a situation which can only be described as deeply indecent. They deserve to be buried, their families deserve information so they can mourn the death of a loved one.

Podlaskie Voluntary Humanitarian Rescue Service organises searches for those who remain unaccounted for. The police don't do it, it's down to activists and volunteers. The state has left us completely alone with this situation. In February 2023, we were looking for a person within a nature reserve in Białowieża Forest.

This person had gone missing a couple of weeks earlier so we were pretty confident that we were looking for a body. Using methods of naturalists who work in the forest, we moved in lines a couple of metres from one another, looking carefully. We found another person who we weren't looking for, a young man from Ethiopia who'd been lying there for a long time, though it was difficult to identify him as his body had been partially eaten by wild animals. It was a shocking sight and one I'll never forget. We're civilians, ordinary people, we haven't been prepared to see human bodies in a wood where we'd usually go for a walk or to pick mushrooms. It's undeniable that seeing the crisis up close takes a toll on activists and their families. I've relied on the support of a psychologist and psychiatrist to deal with what I've seen. Not long ago, I attended the funeral of one of my colleagues, another became sick and only recently regained full health.

While much of this was to be expected from the authoritarian Law and Justice, a right-wing populist party, we were shocked when it continued under the new government, the democratic opposition which took office in December 2023. With the change of government, we hoped that human rights, international law and domestic law would start to be observed. However, to our disappointment this didn't happen. We still see pushbacks. And the current government has introduced a law which decriminalises the use of firearms by border guards in self-defence. I fear this gives them carte blanche to shoot people without consequences. This law was introduced following the death of a 21-year-old soldier who was stabbed trying to prevent migrants entering the country. Though to be honest, the only threat I've ever felt at the borderland was from aggressive, masked representatives of Polish authorities who never even bothered to introduce themselves.

While migration involves challenges, it can be an asset and a benefit, but here we're dealing with a legal and humanitarian crisis. I understand European societies have fears around the threats which might be posed by migration. I appreciate the desire to

protect the borders, I'm not saying they should be completely open. However, the policy of pushbacks does not guarantee control – we simply have no idea who will eventually, after many attempts, manage to cross the border and get to Europe. Poland needs to develop a better strategy. Migration cannot be avoided so we should prepare for it.

People need to be treated as human beings. This begins with making sure they have the right to start asylum proceedings. All of this coincided with a crisis in my own personal life with my mother becoming sick and requiring constant support. I had to quit my job at *Gazeta Wyborcza* to care for her. I'm currently involved with the independent Youtube channel and website *Czaban Robi Raban*, to my mind the only consistently reliable source of information on the crisis. I'm dealing with the trauma of what I've been through but if I could I'd go back to the forest. I remain in contact with my friends who continue to provide assistance to people. We've also stayed in touch with families of the victims, often organising burials. These Muslim funerals are attended by people who have settled in the region after fleeing their own countries, Chechnyans, for example, displaced by the war with Russia. Here we see an example of coexistence, different religions and traditions living side by side. Finally, in death, these refugees find acceptance.









**This ISRF Bulletin brings together a number of papers presented at the ISRF's 2024 conference. Intent on pushing back against dominant migration myths and their harmful effects, these papers discuss the realities of migration, focussing on the causes and impacts of migration, its patterns and trends, its affects and geographies, its lived experience and representation.**

Featuring contributions from Michael Nwankpa, Aurea Mota, Eric Kushinga Makombe, Rebecca Yeo, Theresa Audrey O. Esteban, and Joanna Klimowicz.



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