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Migration transforms the conditions for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals



Migration is transformative both for those who move and for the places and economies of source and destination. The global stock of migrants, depending on definition, is approximately 750 million people: to assume that the world is static and that migration is a problem to be managed is inaccurate. Since migration is a major driving force of planetary and population health, we argue that it must be more directly incorporated into planning for sustainable development, with a focus on the extent and way in which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) incorporate the transformative reality of migration.

The science of migration explains social and demographic dynamics, with human mobility as the norm rather than as a discrete event.¹ Flows of ideas, remittances, and social capital from migration, for example, play a central role in transforming economic as well as social and political life in places of origin and destination. Migration is, therefore, an intrinsic part of social transformation² that occurs in parallel and in combination with other societal trends, including many that are the explicit focus of the SDGs.

Migration processes can have positive and negative effects on social transformation.³ There are widespread concerns, for example, regarding the effect of rapid urbanisation driven by migration on the sustainable use of resources in cities. However, migrant populations have been shown throughout the world to be on average healthier and more economically active than host populations, at least with current migration patterns.⁴ From an economic perspective, migration is often a driver of economic growth: whether economic growth is itself sustainable thus becomes the key question.

The discourse of migration in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects the global political tensions surrounding the issue of migration at the time of its negotiations, culminating in 2015, when many countries, particularly in Europe, experienced major influxes of refugees from Syria and other conflict-affected countries.^{5,6} In effect, the 2030 Agenda frames migration as a temporary and unplanned phenomenon that needs to be managed, rather than as an inherent and longstanding part of sustainable development

and social transformation. The table documents how sedentary framing of development leads to the relevant current goals, targets, and indicators within the SDGs.

Within the SDGs, migration is recognised as a “multidimensional reality” that is of “major relevance for the development of countries of origin, transit and destination” (2030 Agenda, article 29). Migrants are acknowledged as able to make a “positive contribution” to inclusive growth (article 29), but the SDGs seem to refer mostly to benefits in the country of origin in the form of remittances from international labour migrants. Remittances, indeed, play a crucial economic role in countries with high international outmigration, but

Targets and indicators		Relevant insights from migration science
Migration as temporary		
Goal 10: Reduced inequalities	Article 29: underlines the rights of migrants to return to their country of origin. Indicator 10.7.2: migration policies that facilitate “orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people”. Focus on granting permission of temporary stays of forcibly displaced people, agreements on readmission, and monitoring of visa overstays.	Migration as inherent and long-standing part of development and social transformation, including migrants as a source of innovation, economic growth, and cultural diversity. Demographic reality of migrants as healthy and economically active.
Migration enhances development of country of origin through remittances		
Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals	Target 17.3: mobilise financial resources for developing countries by increasing volume of remittances (indicator 17.3.2).	As above.
Goal 10: Reduced inequalities	Target 10.c: reduce costs and barriers to remittances (indicator 10.c.1).	As above.
Migration as international and often labour-related		
Goal 10: Reduced inequalities	Indicator 10.7.2: migration policies that facilitate “orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people”. Focus on “non-nationals”, immigration and emigration, cooperation among countries, and people “displaced across international borders”.	Incorporation of the more prevalent form of migration: internal movements within a country as dominant form globally.
Development as sedentary		
Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities.	No explicit reference to migration or mobility in targets 11.3, 11.a, and 11.b, which call for inclusive urbanisation, sustainable human settlement planning and positive socioenvironmental links between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning and disaster risk reduction strategies.	Permanent and temporary migration as key aspect of climate resilience and social transformation. For example: i) movement to urban areas increases pressure on urban infrastructure and governance; ii) permanent displacement and relocation of populations from places at risk, including from small island developing states.
Goal 13: Climate action	No explicit reference to migration or mobility in targets 13.1, 13.2, and 13.b, despite including a focus on small island developing states.	

Table: Framing of migration in the 2030 Agenda, with relevant goals, targets, and indicators

with significant social consequences such as so-called brain drain effects.

Overall, the 2030 Agenda, and specifically the SDGs on sustainable cities and climate action, have a static concept of human populations, de-emphasising permanent and temporary migration as a key aspect of sustainable development, climate resilience, and social transformation. Where migration is considered to “threaten to reverse much of the development progress”, the 2030 Agenda focuses on the “eradication” of human trafficking (article 27, and targets 5.2, 8.7, and 16.2), as well as “temporary” stays of forcibly displaced people (indicator 10.7.2). Such a framing of climate migration fails to consider migration as a long-term contribution to climate resilience and adaptation.⁷

Incorporating realistic scientific insights on migration and mobility would, we suggest, identify the conditions under which migration could contribute to positive outcomes for many arenas of sustainability, from disaster preparedness, to health and nutrition, and to safe and sustainable cities.

SDG 11 seeks to promote safe, sustainable, and resilient cities, for example, but its indicators need to reflect the reality of how urbanisation is driven by population movement to cities. A target of SDG 11 is to minimise the “proportion of urban population living in slums, informal settlements or inadequate housing”. However, the persistence of slum areas is driven by continued movement of new migrants to cities. In many cities in developing countries, more than half of residents are lifetime migrants. Migrant populations cluster in areas that are exposed to environmental hazards and have been shown to have uneven access to public health and other services and discriminated in labour markets.⁸ Therefore, the realisation of urban sustainability is intimately tied to the effectiveness and rapidity of integration of new populations into urban planning.

SDG 13 on climate action does not make an explicit connection between nations most vulnerable to climate change and increased migration flows, and thus underplays the opportunity to protect or acknowledge the adaptive role played by mobile populations. More than 25 million people per year are displaced internally or internationally by weather-related disasters. Involuntary and forced migration, not least through climate change, represents a breach of rights

and is likely to have significant detrimental health outcomes.^{9,10} It has been shown in diverse settings that migrants contribute by filling key skill gaps, increase the consumption and production of goods and services, and improve local labour market efficiency, particularly in times of crisis or disaster. Migrants also support the resilience and wellbeing of origin communities through financial and social remittances. Rather than harnessing the potential of such interactions, the state-oriented nature of the targets and current indicators associated with SDG 13 implicitly sidesteps migration.

Incorporating the potentially social transformative nature of migration into policy and planning for sustainable development would better reflect the reality of a mobile world. A more encompassing view of migration would, we argue, lead to more appropriate targets and indicators for the SDGs. For example, target indicators could, for SDG 11 on urban areas, include the number of migrants entering informal economic sectors: such migration is most often associated with discrimination and precarity in cities. Additionally, SDG 13 on climate action could monitor regulations across countries for government-led relocation of communities (such relocation is likely to become more widespread into the future). A comprehensive set of targets and indicators would present better opportunities to deal with pressing challenges of social transformations, including ageing populations and declining birth rates in many countries.

In summary, the SDGs need to move beyond the implicit assumption that sedentary lives are the norm and that it is only safe, orderly, and regular migration that contributes to sustainable development. We suggest that, when migration is incorporated as an inherent and continuing part of social transformations, it will become central to long-term climate resilience and adaptation.

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