

The rise of trapped populations

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As border security increases and borders become less permeable, cross-border migration is becoming increasingly difficult, selective and dangerous. Growing numbers of people are becoming trapped in their own countries or in transit countries, or being forced to roam border areas, unable to access legal protection or basic social necessities.

Internationally the border security agenda has been mainly pushed forward by Europe and the US, based on the perception of all cross-border migration as a potential threat that must be intercepted and controlled or blocked. However, in many other regions, countries are following suit in closing their borders to the 'undesired'. 'Border externalisation' in particular creates a ripple effect of countries further afield tightening their borders, as a result of diplomatic pressure to stem the flow of migrants; the EU, for example, puts pressure on states from West Africa to Central Asia to tighten their borders to prevent migrants reaching Europe.

The closing off of borders to migrants has spread across Europe, the Middle-East, West and North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and the US. South America is the only continent that has seen minimal activity in terms of heightened border security in recent decades.

Border controls do nothing to solve the problems citizens are subjected to within

countries. Border controls do however increase the difficulty of employing the age-old strategy of migration as a means to flee from danger or difficult living conditions. Even if migrants' circumstances fall within legal protection frameworks, strict border controls mean they often cannot access protection and are trapped on the 'wrong side' of the border. The result is people becoming stuck at, or drifting between, impenetrable borders, often with no way to escape to safer countries or to access help or legal protection. There are many hotspots where concentrated groups of people become trapped due to border security – such as in northern France, north-west Turkey, northern Bangladesh and North Korea – often congregating in informal 'migrant camps', with many similar scenarios worldwide.

These trapped migrants are vulnerable, exposed to the violations and abuses that are typical for those moving through countries irregularly, including: not having access to basic necessities; discrimination and abuse because of their foreign origin and irregular status; human trafficking (which exposes

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migrants to coercion, deception and physical and sexual abuse); dangerous or forced labour; and organ theft. The very existence of border security also often poses grave threats such as injury or death from electric fences or being violently abused by border guards. Accounts have also been told of migrants being pushed back from borders by guards – back into the sea or into desert areas such as in North Africa or Mexico where risk of death is high. As migrants often try to avoid detection, or attempt to disappear among the settled population, or due to their irregular status are not recognised or respected by local populations or authorities, the struggles of millions of migrants worldwide go unaccounted for.

Climate change is predicted to result in changing demographics and increased migration across the globe and the current trend of sealing off borders is going to present serious problems for those seeking safer and more habitable areas to live. For example, the Sahel region has begun to experience increased desertification and both a decrease in precipitation and a change in precipitation patterns. Migration is already being used as a logical coping strategy in response to climate change and its complex effects in this area. However, national borders in the region – such as between Morocco and Algeria and between Mauritania and Mali – are becoming increasingly impermeable and dangerous for migrants to cross, with reports of migrants approaching the borders being shot at, sometimes fatally, by border guards.

Large proportions of populations affected by climate change will be forced to try to move into safer and more habitable areas but will be prevented from doing so. It seems that border security is set to continue increasing in terms



Families of migrant workers wait under a staircase in the arrivals hall at the Egyptian-Libyan border post at Sallum, awaiting clearance to enter Egypt, 2011.

of the implementation of technologies and methods as well as in geographical expanse. Despite this increase, this phenomenon at a global level is seeing little or no attention in academic, humanitarian or even political spheres. Given the threat of a global surge in trapped populations, research is needed in areas such as how and where migrants can access asylum systems; ways to identify and safeguard trapped populations; and hotspots of where potential future increased migration flows will be blocked by securitised borders.

Bolstered border security means we need to create a commonly adopted, functioning and effective method for migrants to apply for refugee status prior to reaching their desired destination country. This would allow many vulnerable people to seek asylum without being forced to embark on long and arduous journeys, or becoming trapped in dangerous situations and being exposed to multiple human rights abuses, in the attempt to access safer countries.

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