

New regional formations: Rapid environmental change and migration in coastal regions of Ghana and Indonesia

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Kurzdarstellung:

Coastal regions are focal points of social and ecological change. They are traditionally destinations of regional migratory movements as well as gateways for and to international migration networks, and they often function as central nodes of transfer in larger migration regimes. At the same time, coasts around the globe are continuously undergoing morphological and ecological change on different spatial and temporal scales through, among others, geomorphological, oceanographic and climatic factors. The reciprocal influences between the two spheres are at the center of two key concerns of today's societies: environmental change and migration.

The interplay of changing environmental conditions and dynamic migration systems in coastal regions sets the stage for research on the nexus of environmental change and migration. Especially in the context of global climate change, this relatively new field of studies has gained great attention over the last few years, both in the scientific community and the media, provoking fearful scenarios of future mass migration. However, a direct causality between environmental change and migration decisions is widely challenged: recent research suggests that environmental factors alone are not able to explain changes in migration systems. These can only be understood in local and regional contexts, taking political, social, economic, and cultural factors into account. In this project Migration is thereby conceptualized as a complex and dynamic process characterized by varying rationalities and intentions, structural dependencies, political and economic developments as well as cultural narratives. Given the rising uncertainty about how environmental changes and migratory movements are connected, our research project focuses on underexplored links between those phenomena as well as on the broader consequences of migration for the formation of regions.

This approach entails a focus on different ways of constructing and making sense of environmental risks, of negotiating access to and economic utilization of a changing resource base, and of engaging in political conflicts over adequate and just policy interventions (including, for example, resettlement programs or ‘managed retreat’ measures). The project is based on two case studies in coastal regions that experience ongoing, massive changes of their coastal morphology and ecosystems, in Ghana and Indonesia.

Regional adaptation strategies to rapid environmental change – including migratory movements – are embedded in and contribute to the transformation of what we call ‘regional formations’. Building on earlier works of Peet and Watts who conceive of “regional discursive formations” as originating in and displaying the effects of the regional “physical, political-economic and institutional settings”, the concept captures the complex relationships between changing material conditions, cultural framings of those changes, and the various social, political and economic institutions that organize respective societal responses. In their influence on notions, concepts and explanations for change, regional formations are at the same time powerful conditions that impact on how individuals and societies respond to rapid environmental change, and fluctuating institutions that are shaped by everyday actions of inhabitants of the region. Accordingly, our research design is not based on a separation between ‘external’ institutions shaping migrant trajectories, policy responses and resource economies, on the one hand, and the ‘inward’ reality of culture, on the other. Methodologically, this brings an integration of social science approaches and cultural studies by seeing both, institutions and social motives, as culturally structured and flexible.

Today, a vast body of literature is addressing environmental degradation and climate change as an important factor for the dynamics of today’s and future migration, and there is growing consensus that the climate change component is likely to become increasingly significant. But, so we argue, the relationship between environmental degradation and migration is non-linear and complex and can only be understood in the wider context of economic, social and political factors that shape migration decisions. Furthermore, we see a central relevance of regional characteristics of risk interpretation. The perception of environmental risks and the communication of those risks to the resident population are an important factor affecting migratory flows. Migration can thus be seen as a key response to socio-economic, cultural and environmental change. We understand and analyze migration as being deeply interwoven into social, economic, political, cultural and natural change in a region. The way migration is regulated and managed as well formally and informally by states, communities, institutions and actors is enhancing the re-formation of a region itself, through the import of innovations and capital (i.e. remittances).

Coastal regions are traditionally used as pathways for a variety of forms of migration, in many cases channeling step-wise migration and absorbing growing proportions of the total population. Further, low-lying coastal settlements are especially threatened by climate change (and in many cases they have been hotspots of technical interventions geared to adapting livelihoods to rising sea levels.

As Turner (has noted, regions with increasing global flow of goods and services also tend to establish parallel ‘immobility regimes’ exercising surveillance and control over selected groups of migrants, refugees and others. This implies that the choice to migrate can be constrained by numerous factors. The way people adapt to rapid environmental change is, among other factors, closely linked to the existence and the establishment of migration trajectories governed by complex formal and informal networks. People have to choose where to, when and how to migrate. Researchers focusing on the establishment of magnets of in-migration and nodes of transit increasingly emphasize the non-linearity of migration processes. In this context, cultural narratives shaping the decisions taken by migrants are of crucial importance. The concept of trajectories is opposed to an understanding of migration as a fully planned event. The paths (literally) taken by migrants are to a large extent the result of personal networks, communication networks as well as a range of discourses and myths

The analysis of migrant trajectories stresses the non-linearity of contemporary migration and recognizes, apart from the role of cultural codes and narratives, the strong role of intermediate actors such as administrations, institutions and regulatory agencies whose impact is itself culturally mediated. It interprets migration as a spatial configuration, deeply rooted in cultural practices and their globalization). These are also involved in the reproduction and renegotiation of regimes regulating gender differences in risk cultures, migration decisions and the ability to establish and use relevant communication networks and other assets. Informal relations and personal networks might evolve into more formal, institutionalized interaction, forming part of “migrant capital” that might transform in a later stage into concrete action. We can assume that these facilitators produce certain migration patterns, predict the reach and form of various forms of mobility.