

Connecting the Dots amidst Turbulence – Analysing the Disruptions in People’s Translocal Lives in Times of War

Benjamin Etzold & Marie Godin

Abstract War disrupts lives, economies and social relations, forcing displacement and reshaping mobility. In this commentary, we argue for the application of the concept of translocality to examine how violent conflict transforms mobility and social ties across different locations. Moving beyond the idea that migration is simply a movement away from violence, we demonstrate how translocal connections can sustain livelihoods, family life and a sense of normality amid upheaval, and how (im)mobility, place and social relations evolve amid violence and displacement. The translocal lens is thus a useful tool for bridging the divide between (forced) migration and peace and conflict studies.

INTRODUCTION

War is a disruptive force. It injures and kills many people while others are forced to fight. It interrupts economic and social interactions and obliges people to adjust their livelihoods. It drives many away from their homes – within their own country or across borders – and reconfigures the mobilities of many only indirectly impacted by conflict. And war brings about social change, transforming both power relations within a community and personal relations that people maintain at places and across distances. We argue that translocality, a framework that is increasingly being used in (forced) migration studies as well as peace and conflict studies, offers an adequate frame to capture such transformations and disruptions.

In forced migration studies, a large body of scholarship looks into violent conflicts as drivers of out-migration and into respective patterns and effects of people’s displacement to other places. A deeper engagement with people’s personal experiences of violence, coping strategies to warfare and how they relate to both mobilities and immobilities before, during and after violent conflict is a bit more rare, and often limited to single case studies.¹ In peace and conflict studies, the dynamics

of violent conflicts and peace-building as well as the multiple devastating effects of war on people’s lives, on economies, political systems and identities at distinct places are well studied. However, people’s mobilities and their translocal connections and transfers across sites are hardly looked at in detail.²

Moving beyond a linear understanding of forced migration as a movement out of violence, our upcoming edited volume, entitled “Translocal Lives in Times of Conflict – Understanding People’s (Im)Mobilities and (Dis)Connections under Conditions of Violence and War”³ delves deeper into the manifold and multidirectional relations between violent conflicts and human (im)mobility and, in particular, how both are shaped and transformed through social relations that stretch across multiple places and countries. The different contributions adopt the lens of translocality and thereby address fundamental societal questions that have, so far, been insufficiently addressed in scholarship, neither in (forced) migration studies nor in peace and conflict studies. It is the purpose of this commentary to shortly introduce the book’s conceptual take and to show how it helps to address the disruptive effects of violent conflict on people’s mobility and social relations.

TRANSLOCALITY – A CONCEPT AND ITS APPLICATION

The analytical concept of translocality is a further refinement within the transnationalism approach, which was established more than 30 years ago and has by now become a well-established paradigm in social sciences, in particular in migration studies.⁴

The lens of transnationalism helped to overcome the ideological orientation of “methodological nationalism” that largely sees societies as being contained “within the territorial and institutional boundaries of nation-states” as Nina Glick Schiller has argued prominently.⁵ Inspired by human geographers’ reflections about locality and spatial relations, the notion of translocality takes this criticism one step further by focusing on the social and contextual “simultaneous situatedness” of people in distinct locales⁶ and the role that multiple forms of connections across the places, where they come from, travers through, maintain ties to or currently live, play in their everyday lives. Emphasising the importance of recognising people’s position within wider webs of power and their agency to act despite multiple structural constraints, we adopt a social field approach to define translocal social fields as “multi-layered webs of relatively durable social relations, which stretches across multiple places as well as territorial and scalar boundaries, and which are formed and sustained through simultaneously situated actors’ everyday practices and ways of belonging.”⁷ We argue that adopting the lens of translocality is changing the perspective on how we look at the effects of war in people’s multi-sited lives and on conflict-related movements as well as immobilities. It helps us reframe some fundamental societal questions:

How do violent conflicts affect mobility patterns internally, across borders and internationally?

Violent conflicts profoundly reshape patterns of mobility, influencing movement internally, across borders, and at an international scale. In some conflict constellations, people who want to flee cannot as warfare, sieges or mobility regimes hinder their movements leading to a situation of forced immobilisation. Consequently, individuals impacted by conflict find themselves in a position where they have to alter their mobility patterns, sometimes temporarily, sometimes for a longer period of time. In many cases, displacement

becomes protracted, and mobility is no longer a single journey to safety but an ongoing process of adaptation and restoration of life chances across multiple locations. New mobility patterns may emerge and evolve into sustainable forms over time. Instead of framing displacement as linear movements that only come into being due to war or insecurity, the notion of translocality helps to better assess how mobilities are formed and transformed within existing translocal social fields that are affected by conflict. We argue that new and existing (im)mobilities in the context of violent conflict are fundamentally shaped by network relations across localities and borders and thus by people’s simultaneously embeddedness in multiple places.

How are mobility and translocal practices contributing to reshaping a sense of normal life despite disruptive experiences of violence and displacement?

People navigate fractured realities by sustaining connections across distances, drawing on translocal networks to maintain a sense of continuity and belonging. In fact, during violent conflict and amid multiple social ruptures, mobility and translocal practices can become central to the reproduction of everyday life. For instance, while displaced individuals often experience severe disruptions in their livelihoods, their pursuit to rebuild their lives in a new place can also provide a new basis for those ‘left behind’, for instance through remittances. However, upheaval can also give rise to new economic opportunities and lead to new kinds of translocal livelihoods that rest upon mobility and the circulation of resources, especially in cross-border environments. Despite the persistent uncertainty of violence and displacement, translocal practices might then allow for a continuation of social exchange and become strategies for reconstructing a ‘normality’ amidst conflict-related turbulence. In addition, individuals carry their aspirations with them and develop new ones under conditions of duress. Violent conflict, and even forced displacement, can then provide a rare opportunity to follow own ambitions and

potentially even leave behind societal obligations. The notion of a 'translocal social field' is a suitable frame to better understand people's everyday practices, their sense of belonging and interaction with others, and the role that places play therein. As an inherently relational and processual concept, it is highly sensitive to transformations within that field, and can thus be used to assess disruptions of everyday lives, mobilities and translocal interactions due to violent conflict and displacement, and to assess how new 'equilibria' are re-established or a 'sense of normality' is re-asserted after a period of war-related turbulence.

How do people maintain a family life during and after displacement?

People forced to flee due to violent conflict are inevitably forced to translocalise their lives as they search for a place of refuge, whilst still maintaining relations to their respective origin and to others who have moved before them or to other places. Studies with refugees have shown that family separation during flight and multidirectional onward mobilities, which lead family and community members to live their everyday lives across a multitude of countries, are far from exceptional.⁸ Oftentimes, family separation is involuntarily kept up over many years as people face large barriers to return or cannot reunite in one place. These enforced separations lead individuals to reimagine kinship and sustain family bonds across borders.⁹ Translocal practices such as care, communication, and resource sharing are essential for maintaining family life, even when physical reunification is not possible. While new technologies are utilised to sustain and foster connections, not just with individuals back home but also with those dispersed across various countries in both near and distant diasporas,¹⁰ the disruptive effects of conflict and displacement are hard to overcome. Nonetheless, the adoption of digital technologies, including social media platforms, contributes to reshaping both family dynamics and mobility practices. The perspective of

'enacted translocality' points to the ties that have to be actively maintained by and within displaced families in order to be socially united despite physical separation, but also to the risks and costs of disconnection and disrupted family life due to conflict and displacement.

What are the effects of translocal mobility on the livelihoods and resilience of those living in and outside of conflict settings?

The continuation of translocal circuits of people, goods, capital and information plays a decisive role in times of war. For people, who are becoming forcibly immobilized during or after a violent conflict, for instance as they cannot leave their home place or become 'stuck' in refugee camps, translocal connectivity can be the essential lifeline: relatives are sending remittances that help to pay for the escalating costs of living, diaspora actors are providing 'translocally embedded' humanitarian aid, and friends and family keep up the flow of information about the whereabouts of loved ones or the situation in the warzone. For displaced populations, mobility can offer opportunities for work, education, and social participation, but it can also entail precarity, exploitation, and exclusion. For some, mobility out of a refugee or IDP camp to work, return mobility to the place of origin to access resources, or cross-border mobility to facilitate trade is a fundamental part of their livelihoods as examples from Ethiopia and the DR Congo demonstrate vividly.¹¹ The resilience of war-affected populations can be substantially enhanced, if mobilities and vital connections across places can be maintained despite multiple hurdles. Conflict-related disruptions of these translocal practices do, however, undermine livelihood security and even jeopardise the lives of people depending on the vital exchange of resources in conflict settings. Mobility can serve as both a resource and a challenge in sustaining livelihoods and fostering adaptive capacities.

How are places and the spatial relations in regions transformed through violent conflict and translocal mobilities?

The fact that places are constantly transformed, partially in and through the practices of migrants' and other translocally embedded actors, is a fundamental insight of translocality research.¹² War and ongoing violence reconfigure both places and the spatial relations that connect them. Places become reconfigured not only through destruction, but through shifting flows of people, goods, and information, as well as the enduring traces of violence embedded in landscapes, infrastructures, and social relations. Time and temporality are equally central to this analysis, as translocal pasts, presents, and futures differently shape patterns of translocal mobility.¹³ There are also multiple ways in which violence, encompassing not only the immediate devastation of armed conflict but also the more insidious structural violence embedded in borders, migration regimes, and state regulations, actively reshapes spatial configurations, temporal trajectories, and the very fabric of social relations across translocal contexts. These transformations alter not only the physical environment but also the meanings and attachments people ascribe to places, reshaping the geographies of belonging, connection, and conflict. In West Africa, for instance, people's life aspirations and migration trajectories as well as the pathways for human trafficking and smuggling of goods have been substantially altered and redirected through the war in Libya.¹⁴ The role of and circuits of exchange between the central nodes along such mobility networks did thus transform, too. Violence is not necessarily, and only, a temporary rupture in people's lives, but often becomes permanently inscribed in certain places and fundamentally alters the connections that people forge across space.

CONCLUSION

Adopting the lens of translocality enhances the understanding of the social dynamics and consequences of violent conflict, and in particular

how people's everyday lives are spatially stretched and continuously transformed, in multiple ways. First, it emphasizes how war and violence influence the meanings, patterns, and barriers of translocal lives. How exactly (im)mobility and social relationships change in conflict situations is an important question for empirical research. Second, it shifts the analytical focus from migrants' transnationalism across nation states to the translocality of (im)mobilized actors, highlighting the multidirectional mobilities and relational connections that span multiple locations while acknowledging the lasting impact of borders and the importance of place-making amid violence. Third, it contributes to the "de-migrantisation"¹⁵ of discussions around conflict-related (im)mobilities by underscoring that not all translocal lives result from forced migration. Mobility varies among different actors, including those who stay in place, those who are forcibly displaced, and even the perpetrators or entrepreneurs of violence. Fourth, adopting a translocal lens requires us to reflect about adequate designs and methods of empirical research. Among others, multi-sited studies, biographical research and mobility mapping are tools to capture the temporal and relational dimensions of translocal lives in conflict settings.

Thus, to fully comprehend war and displacement, along with the significant societal, economic, and cultural transformations they cause, it is essential to further investigate (im)mobilities and other social practices across interconnected places. Bridging perspectives from migration studies and peace and conflict studies, we thereby advocate for a translocal lens to capture how social relations and networks as well as movements and immobilities emerge and are disrupted under conditions of violence.

Author bio Benjamin Etzold is senior researcher at bicc – Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. In addition, he is affiliated with the University of Bonn's Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS). As human geographer and migration scholar, he conducts research at the intersection of forced migration and refugee studies as well as peace and conflict studies. Email: benjamin.etzold@bicc.de

Author bio Marie Godin is an Assistant Professor in Human Geography at the University of Leicester in the School of Geography, Geology, and the Environment. Additionally, she is a research affiliate at the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford and a research fellow supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. She is also an associate editor for the *Journal of Migration Studies*, published by Oxford University Press (OUP). Email: marie.godin@leicester.ac.uk

¹ E.g., Lubkemann, S. C. (2008). Involuntary immobility: on a theoretical invisibility in forced migration studies. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(4), 454–475. Zuntz, A.-C. (2021). Refugees' transnational livelihoods and remittances: Syrian mobilities in the middle east before and after 2011. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(2), 1400–1422.

² E.g., Checkel, J. T. (Ed.). (2013). *Transnational dynamics of civil war*. Cambridge University Press. Meininghaus, E., & Schlusing, C. (2020). War in Syria: The translocal dimension of fighter mobilization. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31(3), 475–510.

³ Etzold, B., & Godin, M. (Eds.). *Translocal lives in times of conflict: understanding people's (im)mobilities and (dis)connections under conditions of violence and war*. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer. (forthcoming)

⁴ Bilgili, Ö., & Erdal, M. B. (2025). *Migrant transnationalism: IMISCOE Short Reader*. Springer.

⁵ Glick Schiller, N. (2007). Beyond the nation-state and its units of analysis: towards a new research agenda for migration studies. Essentials of migration theory. Working Paper No. 33. Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development. p. 6.

⁶ Brickell, K., & Datta, A. (2011). Introduction: translocal geographies. In K. Brickell & A. Datta (Eds.), *translocal geographies. Spaces, places, connections* (pp. 3–20). Ashgate. p. 11.

⁷ Etzold, B. & Godin. Introduction. In: Etzold, B., & Godin, M. (Eds.). *Translocal lives in times of conflict: understanding people's (im)mobilities and (dis)connections under conditions of violence and war*. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer. (forthcoming)

⁸ E.g., Tiilikainen, M., Hiitola, J., Ismail, A. A., & Palander, J. (Eds.). (2023). *Forced migration and separated families: everyday insecurities and transnational strategies*. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer. Ahrens, J., & King, R. (Eds.). (2022). *Onward migration and multi-sited*

© 2025 Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.

transnationalism: complex trajectories, practices and ties. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer.

⁹ E.g., Christ, S., & Etzold, B. (2024). Enforced transnationalism: Refugees' family lives in Germany under conditions of separation and waiting. In E. Desmet, M. Belloni, D. Vanheule, J. Verhellen, & A. Güdük (Eds.), *Family reunification in Europe. Exposing inequalities* (279-295). Routledge.

¹⁰ Godin, M., & Donà, G. (2021). Rethinking transit zones: migrant trajectories and transnational networks in Techno-Borderscapes. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(14), 3276–3292.

¹¹ Jacobs, C., Kyamusugulwa, P. M., Kubiha, S. L., Assumani, I., Ruhamya, J., & Katembera, R. S. (2022). Is translocality a hidden solution to overcome protracted displacement in the DR Congo? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(18), 4313–4327. Adugna, F., Rudolf, M., & Getachew, M. (2022). A matter of time and contacts: trans-local networks and long-term mobility of Eritrean refugees. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(18), 4328–4346.

¹² Etzold, B. (2017). Mobility, space and livelihood trajectories: new perspectives on migration, translocality and place-making for livelihood studies. In L. de Haan (Ed.), *Livelihoods and Development: New Perspectives* (pp. 44–68). Brill.; Bork-Hüffer, T., Etzold, B., Gransow, B., Tomba, L., Sterly, H., Suda, K., Kraas, F., & Flock, R. (2016). Agency and the making of transient urban spaces: examples of migrants in the city in the pearl river delta, china and dhaka, bangladesh. *Population, Space and Place*, 22(2), 128–145.

¹³ Etzold, B., & Fechter, A.-M. (2022). Unsettling protracted displacement: connectivity and mobility beyond 'Limbo'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(18), 4295–4312.

¹⁴ Haan, L. de, Aghedo, I., & Eaton, T. (2024). *Tracing the 'continuum of violence' between Nigeria and Libya: How the movement of people from Edo State fuels the Libyan*

conflict economy. Chatham House; Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT).

¹⁵ Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the 'de-migranticization' of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2207–2225.