"Migration — the clearest manifestation of the challenges of humanity"

Interview with Heaven Crawley, director at Migration for development and equality — MIDEQ

by Daniel Martins and Felipe Moulin

Is there a common understanding for justice in the phenomenon of migration?

It depends on what kind of migration and where that migration is taking place. Historically, much migration research has focused on migration from the South to the North. There has been a lot of emphasis on issues of justice but the literature in the Global North has looked at these issues in a very particular way, in quite a eurocentric way, rooted in the European and Global North ideas of the rule of law, about injustices that can be remedied through a legal process.

It is quite a particular way of thinking about injustices. Not necessarily to do with injustices that people feel, it is more about the way the legal system can bear on injustices in terms of the Rule of Law.

When we think about migration in the Global South, it is not that it is necessarily qualitatively different from the North, it is more that the context and the things that are important are sometimes quite different. And also the perspectives of the people who are moving.

In the context of the work of the MIDEQ Hub, when we think about Access to Justice, we tend to not necessarily focus on the rule of law, because it is often inaccessible to everyone — not only migrants —, but more about other kinds of forms of justice. Traditional forms of justice, customary forms of justice. Justices that have to do with the way that people feel about their identity and their opportunities. And those may not necessarily be things that

can be remedied by the law, but have to do with relationships, integration, and a wide range of other issues.

The reason why we are doing this, in part, is because when people are talking about injustices they are often talking about things that are not easily remedied by the law, even if the law is effective. Not feeling part of a society or not feeling as if you belong, this is not something easily remedied by the law.

What comes first: access to rights or access to justice?

We should be looking at the relationships between rights and justice in a much more systemic way, because you can have rights but still not have justice. If people legally have some rights — many Haitians in Brazil legally have rights — it does not mean they have justice. There can be a huge gap between rights and justice.

And you can have justice without rights, because the community can mobilize to provide support and you can feel as if you have justice even though you do not have rights.

Ideally you want justice *and* rights, together, but you can only see this as part of a broader system. and this system functions in different ways to keep some groups privileged and some others not.

In other words, rights and justice are part of the same constellation of possibilities. It is about human possibility, human potential. For people to exercise their human possibility, their humanness, they have to have rights, and rights provide a basis for justice, but not the only basis for justice.

How can we discuss the benefits of migration to destination countries?

First, the evidence of the benefits of migration for the destination countries is completely clear. If you look at the history of migration, the Global North would not be in this position of power, politically and economically, without migration. And this includes the benefits that the Global North gained from both colonization and slavery. Without those two forms of imposed migration, the Global North would not be so rich.

Even today the Global North benefits massively from migration because of cheap labour, because of its need to address the demographic deficit, because of the jobs that people have. It’s a fact that Global North countries benefit from migrants. If you look at every single Global North country, the economic evidence is there. There are huge benefits to migration. The main challenges lie in the social, cultural, religious, linguistic and racial consequences of migration.

These are the things that people are struggling much more with, because as soon as you start talking about the economic benefits, very quickly people start to talk about other issues they find more difficult. That is about identity, what migration comes to represent in terms of the transience of the world, the informality and perceived lack of control. Migration is fundamentally a symbolic issue, it is still only 3.6% of the world's population that moves and lives in a country other than the one in which they were born. It is still very small, but still has huge economic benefits. Everybody knows this.

The issue is how you manage people's unsettledness about the ways in which the world is changing. And the clearest manifestation of that change is migration because it physically changes who your neighbors are, who you work with, what you eat, the music you listen to, who your family members marry.

The most fundamental aspects of humanness are being challenged by changes in the world, of which migration is the clearest manifestation. At a time when countries are really grappling with their own national identity: 'Who are we?' If you look at the countries of the

Global North there is so much reference to history. There is no sense of contemporary identity.

You have these parts of the world in the Global South just coming up behind: India, China, countries with a 1/3 of the world population. Suddenly it feels very threatening to the North because they are no longer the primary dominant. And in terms of population the Global North is dying. Demographically it is finished. It is Africa, Southeast Asia and South America that are really on the rise. And you can see that everywhere. This is the fear that it is driving attitudes to migration. It is not based on evidence. It is based on fear.

So are these changes helping us to reshape not only the notion of justice but also how we can approach migration flows?

I take it from a slightly different perspective. I think migration is one element of what we are looking at but it is not necessarily the most important element. Migration is part of broader social economical and political processes, social change and transformation. In a way, I see migration as being a window to look at these other processes, because it is a very good case study or example of how things are or are not functioning for different individuals particularly in the context of movement.

I think it tells us more about the people that move, the communities they move from, the communities they are moving to. And how we understand what it means to be human. I think it is about much more than migration.

Much of the work in the MIDEQ Hub is about humanizing migrants and the phenomenon of migration. The problem of categories and labels is that they dehumanize. And migrants are often talked about as numbers, not as human beings.

When we think about the humanness of people who move we can recognize the similarities

with the humanness of people who do not move. So we see the kind of collective identity but also the potential for collective solidarity because we share much more in common than the differences. So movement is important as a way of thinking about some of these differences but it is not only about the movement. It is about the people and the relationships between the people who move and people who do not move.

In our research with Haitians living in Brazil, we heard the following statement: "A white migrant might be treated as a tourist, whilst a black migrant might be treated as a refugee".

I've written about the problem of categories, and I've written about the problem of what I call *categorical fetishism*, which is this obsession of putting people in a box and labeling them. The problem is that it needs someone outside of the box for the box to exist. Actually, boxes and categories include what they simultaneously exclude. If you have these categories then you will automatically exclude people, as well as include them.

White migrants, people who move who are white, are viewed very differently from those who are black. Perhaps they might be viewed as tourists but they might also be viewed as economic migrants. But they are people who are viewed as potential, who have something to give, who have a contribution to make.

Being black, unfortunately, continues to be very strongly associated with negative ideas of what humanness means, rather than human potential, human spirit, human opportunities.

Migration systems across the world are deeply racialized and Access to Justice is of course very deeply racialized. It is also gendered. So you have this intersection of gender and race in the context of migration, as in society. It really shapes the potential of people to exercise their humanity and to exercise their potential.

I understand why categories exist — our societies are based on the premise of categories after all — but we must be very conscious of these categories, the purpose they serve and the fact that they exclude as well as include. We mustn’t just take the categories as being natural in some way. They move all the time depending on who is included and who is excluded. We do not want to oversimplify and say it is just racism or just gender, rather there are these complex interplays between race and gender in the context of migration.

Is there a difference in policy and integration between countries that have and those that do not have well-established "social justice"?

It comes back to the point I made at the beginning. If we measure justice in the Global South with reference to dominant ideas about the rule of law, or by a specific idea of justice, then it may seem that the South is somehow lacking and needs to improve. There is an idea that the South needs to develop and get to some place that is more similar to the North.

But some countries in the Global South actually have very well-established customary and traditional forms of justice — if we think about justice in those different ways and possibilities.

It is not just about creating systems that somehow replicate the systems that exist in the North. We know that those systems in the North don't always mean justice, particularly for marginalized individuals and groups. We can say that as an aspirational model, the North has a lot of problems.

It is not always about measuring the South relative to the North in that sense, but about thinking about what the South has, the potential of these places and how they work on their own terms. This is why the work of the MIDEQ Hub is so important, because it helps us to understand what these terms are rather than just applying the knowledge from the North to the South and trying to replicate something.

Although the Global North has a public image of having less inequality than the Global South, does it necessarily offer more guarantees or rights for migrants?

We know that inequality globally is growing very rapidly and within every country there are huge increases in inequality, both in terms of wealth, of who owns the majority of the resources and in terms of income, of who has opportunities to create that wealth. And not just income inequalities: there are also significant inequalities associated with gender, race and age, for example.

I've just returned from Kenya, where four people own the same amount of wealth as 22 million Kenyans. There are huge levels of inequality, and they are not limited to the Global South: the Global North is also highly unequal because it is premised on the rule of law and democracy, which as categories, require by definition some people to be excluded.

Those systems also operate in a way that marginalizes, particularly now that migration in the Global North has become highly politicized and a way of nations signaling their allegiance to certain groups in society and not others.

If you want to feel part of society and you think ''I have privileges but that group does not" it makes you feel somehow more important. There are increasing inequalities everywhere and in some places those inequalities have been politicized. The government in the UK will make a political statement about some groups being marginalized — asylum seekers, migrants, disabled people, poor people — and this is supposed to be a good political statement that will get you more votes not less. So marginalization is part of the political narrative. This is almost the premise of capitalism and it is manifesting itself through the political process.

Even though the Global North’s colonialism and enslavement of the South is widely known, why still does the Global North play the victim role on migration flows?

It is a good question but I first have to challenge your assertion. I do not believe colonialism and enslavement is widely known. I was never taught about slavery or colonization in school as I was growing up. I learnt about colonization when I went to university — and not everybody goes to university or studies subjects where this would be considered relevant. I also think there are strong narratives that somehow dominate, that somehow express that colonization was beneficial to the colonized.

In the US recently you even heard people saying that slavery was beneficial to the enslaved. So the idea that people know about colonization and that they are critical of it, I think both of these should not be taken for granted. I think many people do not know about it, and even if they do know about it they somehow think in this very benevolent way, that colonization was beneficial.

For example, the only thing that we were taught in schools in the UK was that William Wilberforce stopped the slave trade, even though it was the British and the Portuguese who started the slave trade and continued it for centuries. So somehow they became the saviour again. Somehow the British stopped slavery. But the British were the main cause of slavery. It is really frustrating. That's why I am challenging the premise of your questioning. There is a lot of learning to be done.

The fact is that the Global North continues to extract billions of dollars from the Global South every single year in resources, of one kind or the other, and yet, as you say, it continues to present itself somehow as a victim of these processes.

I think this is part of the historical narrative about the benevolent Global North or the benevolent West. There is a huge educational task to do. I do not think at all that the negative impacts and the ongoing negative impacts of colonization or enslavement are recognized, talked about, or accepted. Yes there has been Black resistance to some of these narratives, for example, Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall. We have seen the representations of colonization and slavery being dismantled in the UK, there are statues that have been destroyed. But these movements have been met with huge resistance. It is

not that people say "ok you are right, I understand".

They consider the protests to be vandalism and that history is being misunderstood and misinterpreted. There is huge resistance to the idea that colonization and slavery were negative for people and for their countries.

I travel regularly to different parts of Africa. All the time while I am there I hear white people who are living there saying "it was so much better when there was colonization. Everything worked!" But people completely ignore all the inequalities that were already established by the way colonization happened. Many of the racializations that led to ethnic tensions, that did not exist before colonization. Or the political and economic processes that continue to undermine the Global South today.

What is the appropriate world forum to address new political strategies or governance for migration?

The UN system currently provides the apparatus for the governance of migration, mainly through IOM and UNHCR, as well as the financial infrastructures, alongside the World Bank, the IMF. But because they were set up by powerful states, they are primarily represented by the powerful states and led by powerful states.

There have been some challenges recently to that system, to the IMF, to the World Bank. But these structures are established in a way that makes it very difficult for them to be challenged. The structures are very top-down and oriented to the interest of governments, by definition. The UN system is focussed on high-level governance, it is not about community mobilization.

That said, we are starting to see some very interesting forms of new community mobilization. In the South, as well as in the North, the biggest problem is that you have

these incredible things happening all over the world and they are not joined up. Even when there is now a possibility for them to be joined up because of technology, they are still, by definition, grassroots movements and they are also often local. This makes it very difficult for them to scale up, because you lose the specificity of the context when you try to do that.

It feels as though one of the problems we have in mobilizing for a new movement is that we are always conscious of difference, always conscious of intersectionality, always conscious of complexity. Those things make it very difficult to connect communities because you never want to flatten out the differences or ignore the context. Somehow we have to stand back from the details but draw on enough of the similarities and commonalities to be able to create a movement. From the perspective of MIDEQ, those similarities and commonalities are in relation to issues of injustice and inequality. These outcomes are the result of global processes — capitalism, globalization, environmental degradation — with local consequences. Creating solidarity around these issues, through the lens of migration, is a big part of what we are trying to do at MIDEQ.
