Mobility equity in a globalized world: Reducing inequalities in the sustainable development agenda

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ABSTRACT

Human mobility and inequality have determined one another throughout modern history, from the effects of labour migration to processes of urbanisation. The Sustainable Development Goals now offer an opportunity to re-examine this complex relationship in a globalized world. Drawing on major research evidence and key debates, this review article proposes a framework of mobility equity as part of SDG 10, which foresees the reduction of inequalities within and among countries by 2030. The main question addressed is how forms of social, human and digital mobility, including migration, can contribute to reduced inequalities and positive development outcomes. The reviewed research underpins the need for an approach that prioritizes equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes. Mobility equity offers such an approach and rests on two main foundations: people's equal capacity and freedom to be mobile in empowering ways, and the equal and inclusive regulation of mobility in all its forms, including human, social and digital mobility. The approach goes beyond income inequality and migrants' remittances to incorporate the differential mobility capacities among people in different contexts. This includes categorically excluded groups such as refugees, racialized minorities, and lower castes, but also tens of millions of workers in the global digital economy. As part of a special issue on new SDG Perspectives, the article provides new ideas for thinking about research and policy-making within the wider inequality-mobility nexus of global development.

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1. Introduction

Throughout human history, moving elsewhere fundamentally changed countless lives and determined people's social and economic positions at both ends of the journey. As mass migration into Shanghai doubled its population from 1980 to 2010, so did Manchester's from 1811 to 1841: movements that undoubtedly created socioeconomic opportunities for many, and yet they also accentuated inequalities. Think about the tribulations of Manchester's 19th century working class life, or the expanding slums of contemporary "arrival cities" that offer little chances for urban upward mobility (Saunders, 2011). Human mobility and inequality are inseparably linked. Yet, it is surprisingly difficult to unpack the precise nature of this linkage. Increased or reduced inequality is one possible outcome of human mobility, as the movement of people often creates or reinforces difference and inequality, as well as blending or erasing such differences (Salazar, 2013). At the same time, inequality is one of the driving forces behind mobility: a lack of opportunity pushes people out of rural areas into cities, from

where they often move onwards and become international migrants (Kuptsch, 2015, p. 343). Global inequality – or inequality between countries and regions – continues to trigger population movements from developing countries, generating remittances that outweigh official aid.

Without doubt, mobility and inequality are mutually implicated in a myriad of ways. The question is how this complex entanglement can be conceptualised meaningfully and coherently, in order to find answers to the underlying key questions: How can migration and human mobility reduce inequalities between and within countries? How can human mobility be regulated in ways that contribute to sustainable development? What, if anything, is *mobility equity*?

These questions gain relevance in light of Sustainable Development Goal 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries at a time of deepening global interconnectedness. Against this backdrop, a coherent conceptual framework is needed that builds on empirical evidence and the literature on the mobility-inequality nexus, situated within global sustainable development as part of an SDG Perspectives special issue published in this journal. This framework of *mobility equity* rests in two main

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pillars: to ensure people enjoy equal mobility opportunities, including the freedom to choose whether or not to move; and the creation of just and inclusive mobility regimes that can contribute to equality of outcomes and wider sustainable development.

Although migration is a central component, mobility equity reaches beyond migration to include diverse forms of *human mobility*, such as labour commuting and new digital mobilities of labour. On a second level, speaking of mobility rather than migration integrates *social mobility* into the wider framework, instead of seeing it as a separate issue. Reducing inequality in sustainable ways often depends on whether or not people can transform human mobility into social and economic upward mobility. This is not to say that people always decide to move for socio-economic reasons, considering forced exiles who have no choice, alongside those who seek freedom and a different life elsewhere without social upward mobility in mind. As a very particular field of policy making and governance, *migration* cannot capture the diverse human experience of human mobility and immobility, its unequal regulation by political and economic regimes, and its embeddedness in various social and cultural contexts. Mobility, as a critical concept, further avoids the 'methodological nationalism' that has long taken nation-states as the only units of migration analysis (Salazar & Glick Schiller, 2014, p. 10). Analytically, mobility incorporates the movement of people and labour across scales and places it in relationship to the regimes that govern it unequally.

This review brings three sets of largely disconnected literature in conversation with one another: policy-oriented publications on the SDGs and SDG 10; the interdisciplinary literature that has conceptualised mobility in relation to global inequality; and the multi-disciplinary research evidence from qualitative case studies and quantitative research about inequality, migration and social mobility in the contemporary world. This conversation uses the productive tension between theory, research evidence, and policy-oriented debates.

The following section will position the framework within the SDGs and the momentum they create around mobility and inequality, before reviewing major approaches to inequality. The mobility framework is then conceptualised more clearly, followed by a review of research in three main areas: migration, social mobility, and digital mobility. The final section will conceptualise the framework of *mobility equity* in order to discuss its policy implications and potential applications, followed by brief concluding remarks with recommendations for future research.

Mobility equity ultimately emerges as a necessary precursor of reduced inequalities in a globalized world. Although contingent on variation in cultural context, political economy and individual background, mobility equity builds on the just distribution of mobility opportunities. This necessarily includes people's freedom to choose whether or not to move, alongside the establishment of fair regimes that govern mobility in inclusive ways without undermining people's agency and freedom. Developing concerted policies that work towards mobility equity across regional, national and global scales poses major challenges – especially if no one is to be left behind.

2. SDGs and the inequality-mobility momentum

This review comes at a time when a steady rise in income and wealth inequalities has put the problem of inequality high up on the global SDG agenda. For long inequality has been overshadowed by the dominance of poverty in development debates since World War II (Escobar, 2011); and the SDGs predecessors, the MDGs, had a "blind spot" with regard to inequality and social injustice, and probably even worsened inequalities in some places (Anderson,

2016). This has changed: inequality and mobility are moving centre stage in the global development agenda. Not only is there now an SDG for reducing inequality, but the SDGs overall accorded migration a more prominent role. This is partly owed to "lobbying" by IOM, UN agencies, and the World Bank (Bakewell, 2015). Moreover, inequality is a component of almost all other SDGs, such as "no poverty", "gender equality", and "decent work and economic growth". The role of sustainable and just forms of mobility is less explicit, but nevertheless crucial to the fulfilment of several other goals, such as "quality education", "climate action", as well as decent work and growth. These connections offer an opportunity to rethink the relationship between inequality and mobility in the context of the SDGs.

As any policy attempt of its scale, the SDGs had already attracted criticism before their official release. Some saw them as a framework premised upon continuing destructive capitalism and unsustainable consumption. In a world that is "overheating", overcrowding and accelerating, the tension between growth and ecology has become increasingly visible (Eriksen, 2016). Ending poverty and reducing inequality may eventually require actors to move towards sustainable consumption and production in parallel (Griggs et al., 2014). This includes the growing carbon footprint of international travel and the environmental costs of digital technology. Taking these limitations into account, the implicit *connection* between migration and inequality within the development agenda, which is not explicitly developed, opens important opportunities to do so. This may open the traditionally national policy area of inequality up for international action, not least because mobility embodies the global interconnectedness of phenomena that are widely considered to be domestic policy issues.

One hope is that SDG 10 could increase the "mobility of policies", in the sense of making policies in different arenas mutually implicated and better connected. It may lead to coordinated action across scales, in the spirit of the SDG agenda being a response to "growing economic, social, and planetary complexity in the twenty-first century" (Kanie, Bernstein, Biermann, & Haas, 2017). This global complexity makes inequality *within* countries both a universal and a systemic problem, with widely recognized negative impacts on society, health and political stability (Chancel, Hough, & Voituriez, 2017). Moreover, the more globalized the world becomes, the more that the reasons why we should be concerned about within-country inequalities also apply between countries (Wade, 2004). Growing recognition of this impact has driven the UN and other global actors to call on states to formulate nationally specific implementation strategies, and mobility-oriented approaches must form part of such efforts.

Yet, one problem of SDG 10 remains that no measurable target clearly outlines how far each country must reduce inequality, which is complicated by the different layers and types of inequality: inequality within or between countries, between individuals or groups, and inequality of opportunity or outcomes? Indeed, vertical inequality between individuals does not have the same effects as horizontal inequality between groups, which can fuel conflict and instability (Keen, 2012; Stewart, 2008). People also respond in diverse ways as they cope with the emotions and grievances that inequality engenders (Barford, 2017).

In light of inequality's multidimensional nature – even if mobility is not considered – few proposals for measured targets informed SDG 10, such as those based on the Gini coefficient or the Palma index.[1] Currently, the only measurable target, 10.1,

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[1] The Gini coefficient is a prominent measure of income inequality that varies between 1 (indicating perfect equality) and 0 (indicating perfect inequality); the Palma index is another measure of income inequality, reflecting the ratio of the share of national income received by the richest 10 percent of the population to the share received by the poorest 40 percent of the population.