

Non-migrant, Sedentary, Immobile, or ‘Left Behind’? Reflections on the Absence of Migration

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Non-migration is rarely studied in its own right. Scholars who do analyse the experiences of people ‘left behind’ tend to focus merely on developmental impacts of transnational migration in regions of origin. Very little research analyses how non-migrants experience and make sense of their situation, and how these aspects relate to a greater socio-cultural matrix of values and expectations informing (im)mobility.

This paper explores the absence of migration and different frameworks for analysing it. The aim is to move beyond a sedentary perspective, which does not problematise immobility because it considers it to be the norm and therefore, not something to be explained or scrutinised. First, the paper starts with a discussion of the semantics of the vocabulary on the absence of migration and the implicit normativity of the different terminology. Two opposed interpretations of different examples of the absence of migration are then presented, based on a functionalist and conflict approach, respectively. Finally, the paper discusses the role of hegemony and power in defining who does and should move. Throughout the text, various empirical cases are discussed, mainly drawn from contexts of transnational migration in West Africa.