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Non-Linear Migrations and Urban Resilience

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Abstract

This paper looks at migrations as an inherent component of urban resilience and critically examines the linear understanding of rural-to-urban migration in urban studies. Based on an eight-month-long qualitative empirical study in Dhaka, Bangladesh, this paper reports how migrants from different rural parts of the country, with their complex experiences around migrations, enter various spatial systems in urban Dhaka- ranging from shared living to institutional involvements to temporal displacements due to external factors (such as pandemic). This paper also documents how their nonlinear migratory journeys contribute to building a sense of urban resilience toward the uncertainties that various spatial systems offer to them. Drawing from a rich body of literature on urbanization, rural-urban migration, and actor-based resilience, we explain how alternative narratives of non-linear migration studies from our fieldwork can redefine urban resilience from a migrant's perspective.

Key words: Migration, Resilience, Urban Design, Urban Planning, Pandemic

1. Introduction

The era of modernization marked the birth of the western industrial city, massive migrations from villages to cities, and the social and economic upheavals of urbanization (Huyssen, 2007; Outka, 2009; Wojitowicz, 1996). We live in a period of migrations at various scales (Liedvogel, ˚Akesson, & Bensch, 2011). Natural disasters or political conflicts, or upward mobilities- national and international migrations have become an inseparable part of modern lives (Xu, 2013). The symbolic differentiation of urban spaces and lifestyles is rooted in multiple processes combining long-term economic decline concerning the surrounding suburbs and rural areas, successive waves of migration within and outside the city, the growth of cultural consumption, and the commercialization of identity politics (Zukin, 1993).

Espin (1987) pointed out that the migration process is a three-step process: the initial decision to resettle, actual geographic movement to other areas, and coping with a new society and lifestyle. According to Duyvendak (2011), in the era of modernization, the departure from our roots is more common and is linked to belonging (Duyvendak, 2011). The process of modernization enables numerous opportunities for individual development. Increasing aspirations partly explain why development has no tendency to curtail migration (Clemens et al., 2014; Czaika & Vothknecht, 2014; De Haas, 2007). Moreover, the study on migrations has become one of the most prominent venues

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in urban studies (Williamson, 1988; Zhang & Shunfeng, 2003; Urry, 2016). However, in many cases migrations have been seen as a one-dimensional process, where to ensure industrial or urban development at a national level, people from rural areas migrate to big cities (Skeldon, 1997; Mitra & Murayama, 2009; Bhattacharya, 1993). Our paper focuses on migrations from rural/ small towns to big cities in Bangladesh and based on an empirical study argues that migrations are not a one-dimensional or linear process that starts with one location and ends at another where development projects are happening. Rather migration can be a complex and non-linear journey for a migrant within their national borders. Their migrations can be multi-directional, they can end up settling where they started their journey. In their sequence of migrations, migrants gather immense experiences around their spatial, material, and temporal understanding of urban spaces. This paper documents such experienced based cases and presents how such experiences help the migrants develop resilience against various urban uncertainties.

A common definition of urban resilience is the capacity of urban systems and their inhabitants to withstand, adapt, and transform in the face of various shocks and stresses, such as climate change, political or social unrest, natural disasters, terrorism, economic crises, etc. Urban resilience also implies a positive and sustainable transition of urban systems and their inhabitants. Urban resilience has gained increasing attention in urban planning and design studies. It is mentioned in adaptation planning, policy development, and implementation across multiple levels of government, not just in urban climate policy (Olazabal et al, 2012). It involves multiple aspects that contribute to the overall resilience of a city. Infrastructure resilience focuses on the robustness and adaptability of a city's physical infrastructure systems, including transportation networks, power grids, water and sanitation systems, communication networks, and buildings (Jha et al., 2013). Social resilience and effective governance and planning involve fostering strong social networks, promoting a more cross-sectoral approach to urban development issues, social cohesion, community engagement, and inclusivity in the city. Access to quality healthcare, social services, affordable housing, land use planning and green spaces contribute to community well-being. Health-focused planning, disease prevention strategies, and resilient healthcare systems are essential to mitigate and respond to public health emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of addressing the dimensions of health, including nutrition and food security, and well-being, as part of urban resiliency (Cao et al., 2021). Utilizing smart city technologies, data analytics, sensors, and artificial intelligence helps cities monitor and respond to threats in real-time, optimize resource allocation, improve emergency response systems, and enhance overall efficiency and sustainability (Cao et al., 2021). Overall, the literature on urban resilience adopts these approaches to improve capacity for planning and preparation, uptake, recovery, and adaptation to adverse events (Sharifi et al., 2016; Meerow et al., 2016; National Research Council, 2012; Sharifi, 2020).

However, the role of migration experiences in shaping urban resilience remains underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by examining the non-linear migration processes in Bangladesh and argues that a nuanced understanding of resilience in a developing context like Bangladesh requires an analysis of the spatial experiences of the migrants at different stages of migration.

2. Methodological Notes

We conducted an eight-month-long qualitative empirical study in Bangladesh, from mid-March to December 2020. Our team consists of three Bangladeshi researchers, two of whom migrated to Dhaka from two different towns outside Dhaka. All three of them have academic

training in Architecture and Urban Design and Planning. Our study was conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and due to government-imposed restrictions, the study was entirely online. Our study had two major phases: (a) reaching out to the people from our social network, who have experienced or are still going through migration processes. (b) Online interviews and FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) with the participants. We interviewed 27 participants (12 females, and 15 males, ages ranging from 20-35 years). All of our participants have migrated or are still going through migration processes for mostly educational purposes. They all belong to the middle-income economic group in Bangladesh. The interviews were taken through popular mobile-phone applications such as Viber, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp. Detailed notes were taken during the phone call. Participation in this study was 100% voluntary. All the interviews were taken in Bangla, the native language of Bangladesh. We asked for verbal consent at the beginning of the interview. The questions we asked were semi-structured. Each of the interviews was 25-50 minute-long depending upon the availability of the participants during the Bangladeshi daytime. All of the participants were found through our social media connections. Here we also need to mention that our study started with the research question about how Dhaka's urban dwellers were coping with the pandemic and what kind of changes they were bringing in their lives. When we started taking interviews, we found that the participants with complex migration histories were coping with the pandemic situation more strategically than the participants, who were raised in the capital city. Then we focused on the complexities of migration and studied how the experiences of the migrants help build resilience around urban uncertainties like pandemics or natural disasters.

The data collection methods for this study consisted of 27 semi-structured interviews and 5 focus group discussions (FGDs), which generated over 300 pages of field notes and over 1000 minutes of audio data. The study adhered to the ethical principle of voluntary and unpaid participation, as offering monetary incentives for such conversational activities is culturally inappropriate in Bangladesh. The researchers conducted all the interviews and FGDs in Bangla, the native language of the participants, and obtained their consent for audio-recording. The audio data were securely stored in a computer and later transcribed and translated into English by the bilingual research team members.

The research team adopted an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to analyze the anonymized qualitative data (collected from the interviews and FGDs) in relation to the research questions. The three authors independently read each transcript multiple times to identify and exclude irrelevant segments and to highlight relevant excerpts. They also held weekly virtual meetings to discuss and verify the discarded materials to ensure no critical data was overlooked. The remaining anonymized data (including interviews, field notes, and FGDs) were then subjected to open coding (Strauss et al., 1990) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The researchers did not impose any preconceived themes on the data, but rather allowed the themes to emerge from the patterns of the data. They grouped the data into clusters based on the patterns and then synthesized the clusters into themes that captured the findings. The team met virtually twice a week to review and evaluate the highlighted and non-highlighted excerpts, as well as the themes, for their contextual accuracy and appropriateness to the research questions. The final themes, which were agreed upon by all three research team members after several rounds of analysis, are presented in the following sections.

3. Findings

Our data reveal a wide variety of ways around how non-linear migrations in the lives of our participants help them develop resilience against various uncertain urban

scenarios. To better articulate the findings, we group them into three major aspects of non-linear migrations: (a) transient attachments, (b) adjusted performances, and (c) altered hopes.

3.1. Transient Attachments

Our fieldwork documents cases, where participants express scenarios of sequenced, small-scaled, and multiple migrations before settling in a big city from smaller ones. In this process, they develop short-term attachments with the spaces they spend fragments of their migratory time. Through these temporal spatial involvement or attachments, a migrant develops "action-based" learnings that help them survive in the later phases of their migratory process. Ultimately these transient attachments generate a form of resilience when these migrants finally reach their urban "destinations".

For instance, one of our participants Kaya (pseudo name, 26 years old female, grad student at a local University in Dhaka) was born and brought up in Panchgarh, a small town in the far north corner of Bangladesh. When she was in grade 6, her parents sent her to another city Rangpur (also in north Bangladesh) to get prepared for high school education at a prestigious boarding school. During this time, she stayed with one of her relative families, shared the bed and reading table with her cousin-sisters, and aligned herself with the host family's values, sentiments, and spatial usages (which were quite different from her own family at Panchgarh). Kaya's understanding of private spaces was replaced by the protocols of using shared spaces. She started to follow an imposed timetable of using the bathroom and kitchen since running water was not always available in her relative's house. Her cousin-sister used to study till midnight. So, Kaya's routine of going to bed at sharp 10 pm was also hampered. Her relative's family followed religious rituals with extreme importance. Kaya gradually became a part of their daily religious rituals. Gradually she picked up new habits and a form of "action-based learning" helped her perform according to the socio-spatial demands of her relative's house. In other words, she attached herself transiently to a new system of operation as a part of her migration journey. This transient attachment and her involvement/ effort in making it (temporarily) sustainable assisted Kaya to survive her next phase of migration to the boarding school. She was already equipped with experiences of shared living, shared usage of resources, and co-existing with shared value systems.

Kaya's third migration to Rajshahi city (one of the major district cities in Bangladesh, situated in the northern part of the country) offered new forms of attachments to survive in an urban environment, extremely different from living in a boarding school. She lived in Rajshahi city for two years to get prepared for her undergrad admission. While living in a mess (a shared living condition in a rental apartment/ house), she developed transient attachments with the mess's existing networked operative models. For instance, the landlord used to close the entry gate to the building at 7 pm sharp and open it at 8 am in the morning. All the girls living in the mess had to enter the building before 7 pm. So, Kaya had to organize her daily routine according to that timetable. Although additional tutorial classes could help her prepare for college admission, she purposefully avoided those classes. Kaya's transient attachments in Rajshahi city demanded her active involvement in many spatiotemporal settings, which often went beyond her mess life– ranging from contacting a good restaurant (to order her daily meals) to finding a reliable doctor to help her recover from diarrhea and acidity she developed from having "outside" foods.

When Kaya migrated to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh from Rajshahi, she ended the local attachments she developed in Rajshahi, brought the experiences with her, and implemented those experiences to develop survival mechanisms in the mega

city. When the city went through harsh conditions during the pandemic, Kaya found herself in a more balanced situation than her friends in Dhaka, who never went through any form of migration in their lives. City-wide lockdowns, hygiene, and sanitation vulnerabilities in shared living conditions, limited vehicular mobilities, and limited urban services- Kaya could better handle such situations through her learnings from the transient attachments in her migration process (Figure 1.1).

Like Kaya, millions of migrants living in Dhaka city develop certain kinds of resilience to urban uncertainties. Such resilience contributes to responding, reacting, and often resisting various "failures" urban lives offer to them and the city.

3.2. Adjusted Performances

Many of our participants mentioned that at every step of their migration journey, they had to adjust their space-based urban performances in the public domain as well. Such adjustments helped them to build resilience toward various urban unexpected conditions. The following case shed light on such a situation.

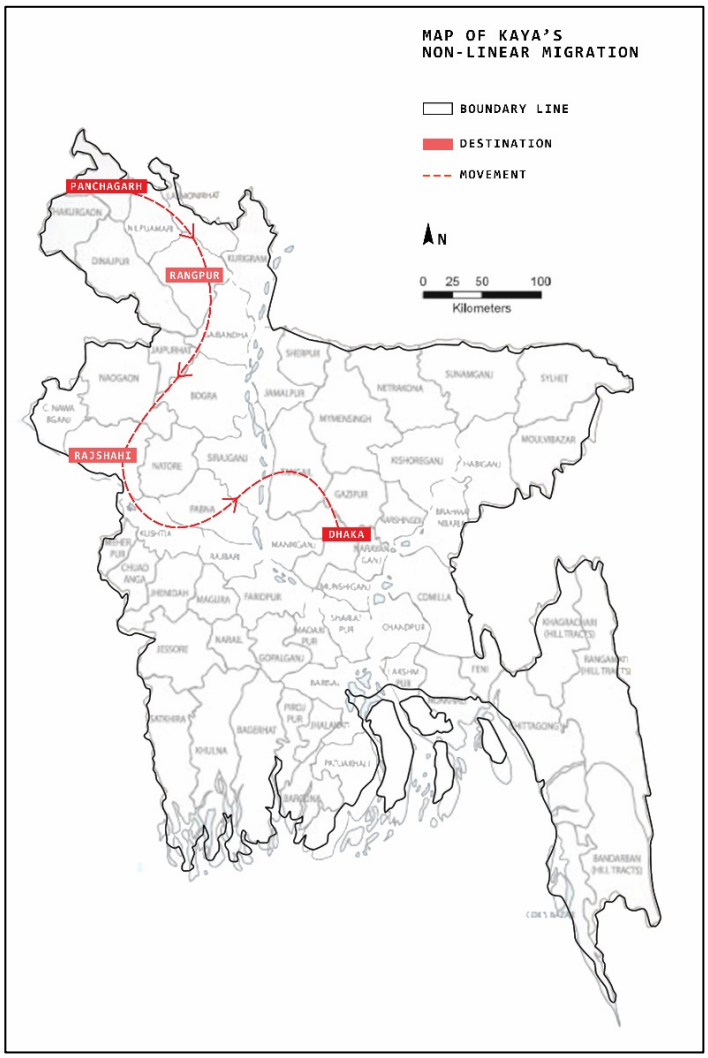

Figure 1. Map of Kaya's non-linear migration

Farid (pseudo name, 33 years old, male, employee at a multinational company)

lived in 4 different locations in Bangladesh before he finally settled in Dhaka (Figure 1.2). He is originally from a small village in Pabna (a district 146.3 kilometers northeast of Dhaka). As an undergrad student, he was admitted to a renowned private university in Dhaka. Then he went to Chattogram city (the second largest city in Bangladesh) with a job and again came back to Dhaka to pursue a better job opportunity. Farid said that when he was studying as an undergrad student, he had just migrated from Pabna. He discovered that at the university, institutional public spaces (such as the cafeteria, lounge, and student gathering spaces, among others) were mostly dominated by students who were originally from Dhaka city. Farid, with his Pabna accent of speaking Bangla and slightly introverted and insecure nature, found himself at the corner of the cafe. Gradually he found friends, who were also from outside Dhaka and less confident about their backgrounds from small towns and villages. The first academic year was horrible for them as they wanted to break the cultural barrier and tried to spatially "perform" like the Dhaka kids.

Farid also stated that in the second year, they realized that being a part of Dhaka students would not help them claim spatial recognition on their campus. Hence, they started their own cultural activity club, comprised of students who are from the northern part of Bangladesh. Together they started to organize events promoting North Bangladeshi cultural heritages. Gradually their club started to become popular among the students. Migrated students from other parts of Bangladesh also came forward with their own clubs. Common spaces for students no longer belonged to only Dhaka students. Rather a spatial democracy was formed.

In 2013, during the collapse of the Rana Plaza ready-made garment factory, Farid's club of migrant students raised financial aid to support the victims.

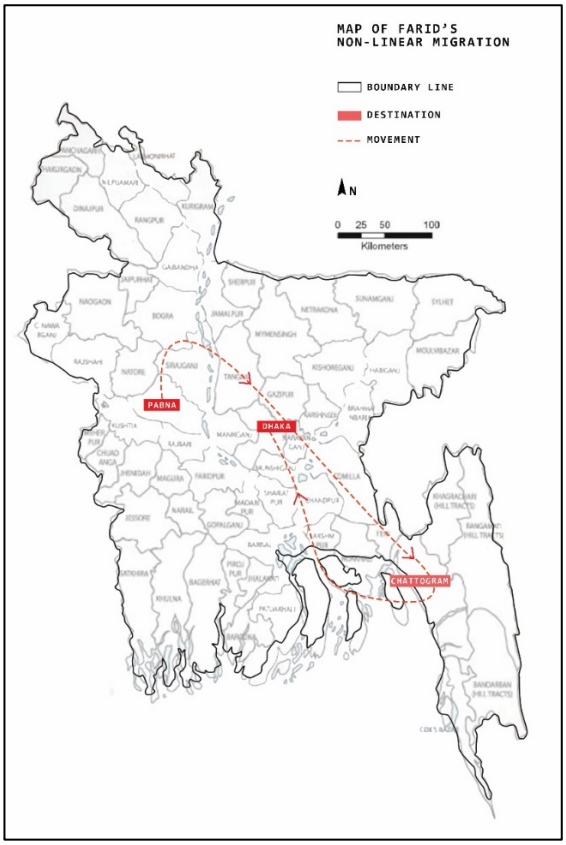

Figure 2. Map of Farid's non-linear migration

Their strong network also contributed to teaching homeless children from Dhaka

streets. They also distributed warm clothes in North Bengal during harsh winters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the club volunteered in vaccination camping and maintained area-wise lockdowns. Farid left the club after he graduated. However, he is still connected with the club remotely and participates in any form of social welfare programs organized by the club. He mentioned to us that the club started with the idea of gaining visibility and raising voices for migrating students at an institutional level. Gradually the club and its members actively adjusted and expanded their performances. The club members' identities as migrants (short/long term) in Dhaka have helped them tell unique narratives, gain popularity, and develop strong networks in forming urban resilience against various urban disasters.

3.3. Altered Hopes

In the migration process, migrants often return to their hometowns for a short or long period of time. During the first few phases of the pandemic, a significant portion of our participants had to leave Dhaka and go back to their hometowns. The sudden loss of in-person jobs or rise in rents, online job opportunities, and online learning systems of educational institutes, among others, encouraged many of our participants to leave Dhaka city temporarily or permanently. However, they went back to their hometowns with altered hopes, which were generated during their non-linear migratory journey.

The following case sheds light on this issue. For a long time in her migration process, Samina (pseudo name, 23 years old, undergrad student, female) was very much upset about leaving her hometown to pursue higher education. She struggled to get along with the spatial and cultural shifts in every "stoppage" in the migration journey (Figure 1.3). For instance, when she moved to Dhaka to start her college (undergrad) education, Samina struggled with the "speed" of the city. She said that in her hometown, Barishal (located in the southern part of Bangladesh), the pace of the town was quite slower than in Dhaka city. The main mode of transportation in Barishal was the rickshaw. Motorized vehicles were rare inside the town. Inter-town connecting buses stopped outside the town. When she moved to Dhaka, Samina found the city in a rush. Motorized vehicles, public buses, and auto-rickshaws made the city "fast" to her. Even the people walking on the sidewalks seemed to be faster than in her hometown. After living in the city for more than six years, during the pandemic, Samina decided to go back to Barishal and start a clothing business online from her hometown. Basically, she started to import fashionable women's wares from Dhaka to Barishal and sold those through her Facebook page. After settling down in her hometown suddenly she found the "slow pace" of her hometown became detrimental to the growth of her business. She was not able to make her deliveries on time. She oftentimes lost her clients due to the unavailability of faster or on-time public transportation. While in the first phases of her migration journey, she was hoping for a "slowed down" urban condition, and now she is hoping for a "faster" hometown. Her short-term migration to Dhaka and return to her hometown altered her hopes about urban speed.

Our field study revealed similar stories of altered hopes around many urban issues. Some of our participants complained about the interrupted digital connectivity in their hometowns, some complained about inadequate job opportunities, and some complained about rigidity in social value systems (Dhaka being more open-minded and accepting). Their migration journeys altered their visions around urban expectations. In other words, what a growing urban condition should provide its dwellers is often shaped by the thoughts and experiences of the people who are migrating back from bigger cities. This whole situation (backed by altered hopes) is developing a new sense of urban resilience for those growing small towns. Such resilience develops as the altered hopes of the migrants (who are coming

back to their hometowns from bigger cities) meet the traditional hopes of the small towns that are aspiring to become "developed". For instance, as Samina mentioned to us, her hometown Barishal is now building wider roads to accommodate more "speed" in the town. However, this new layout is replacing the town's old road layout accompanied by roadside narrow canals (which helped carry rainwater to the rivers during heavy monsoon). As a result, Barishal town is now suffering from water clogging in monsoon. This situation demands a resilient infrastructure design that embraces both the old technique of channeling out rainwater and new strategies for "speeding up" the town.

4. Discussion

This paper presents non-linear migration as a form of developing urban resilience. Through a series of cases, this paper argues that the linear or one-dimensional understanding of migration (from rural areas to urban) oftentimes misses the nuances of the complex migration process in the developing context. The documented cases also present that the migration journeys of our participants are layered, sequenced, phased, and oftentimes reversed. Throughout this journey, migrants gather experiences, adjust their spatial performances, develop transient attachments, and their hopes are often altered. All these contribute to developing new forms of urban resilience and help these people to respond, react, or resist various urban uncertainties like pandemics, socio-political conflicts, or the complexities posed by modernist development strategies designed by the state.

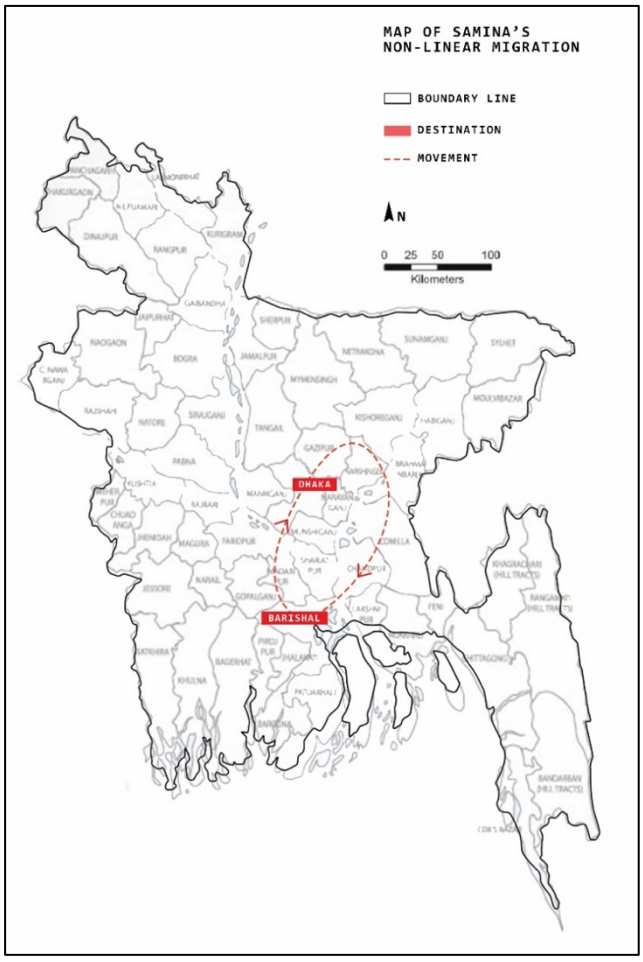

Figure 3. Map of Samina's non-linear migration

Our study hence points toward three essential issues around urban resilience studies. First, we need to analyze, synthesize, and conceptualize the nuances of internal migrations in a country and how they build resilience among migrants and in the overall operative model in an urban condition. Second, we need to bring in the voices of the migrants in urban design decisions since their experiences can reveal alternative understandings of existing city spaces, their limitations, and possibilities. Third, urban planning and design methodologies of small towns or mid-sized cities in developing contexts like Bangladesh, need to create a balance between the temporal necessities of the migrants (who are coming back from big cities) and the existing traditional values and urban sentiments of the small town. Such balances can contribute to the overall emergence of resilience in a growing urban condition.

5. Limitations and Conclusion

Our study only concentrates on empirical study of a limited number of participants from middle-income social group. Migration stories from the lower income or lower-middle income groups could add more layers of complexities, which could have defined urban resilience from another perspective. However, including other socio-economic groups or more marginalized communities were beyond the scope of this paper. We have studied only those who have recently migrated or are still in the migration process. This limits the findings of the paper only to the newer form of resilience. Generations before this participant group could have developed a different kind of resilience toward urban uncertainties, which also is beyond the scope of this paper. We acknowledge that those studies could reveal new information. This paper also does not address the socio-economic implications of non-linear migrations. Therefore, the findings of this paper cannot be generalized to other contexts or populations. The contribution of this paper lies in the depth of data, the richness of details, and the deeper understanding of migration patterns and their relation to urban resilience that it provides. Future research could build on this paper by engaging with more communities and expanding the scope of analysis.

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