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COMMENTARY

Digital nomadism and global mobility: Challenges and suggestions for international migration policies

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The three previous industrial revolutions brought advancements in the steam engine, mass production and the rise of digital technology, respectively. The third one, known as the digital revolution reshaped the manner that people work by enabling the transition to remote working. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this transition due to the limitations and quarantine procedures relied on during this period. The flexibility that the internet and digitalisation offer to the workplace, on the one hand, and the ease with which international migration may now occur, on the other, pave the way for the birth of a particular type of remote work: digital nomadism. With the lifting of travel limitations, recently, a fresh debate has re-emerged focusing on the potential impact of digital nomadism on future migration patterns. International migration emerges as one of the key arenas where urgent policy-making concerns in relation to digital nomadism are needed. However, to better policy-making, the international migration of digital nomads ought to be considered from sociological and geographical perspectives. This commentary will bring forward relevant policy suggestions in relation to these perspectives by shedding light on the questions of precarity and inequality formed with this particular form of labour mobility.

DIGITAL NOMADS' PURSUIT OF FREEDOM FACING WITH THE QUESTION OF PRECARIETY

Digital nomadism is known as a new form of lifestyle-focused labour migration that is made possible by advancements in technology, infrastructure and employment models (Polson, 2019). Part of Millennials, digital nomads, consists of three categories. First, people having soft skills who engage in gig economy like copy-editors, website designers and social media marketing employees. The second group comprises people with high-demand talents in technological sectors such as computer programming or software engineering; and the third category refers to people who initiated location-independent entrepreneurial activities after quitting moderately well-paying corporate jobs (Thompson, 2018). Moreover, previous research on the demographic profile of digital nomads demonstrated that this particular group is associated with white male, middle/upper-middle-class members of the Millennial generation, mostly from affluent Western industrialised nations, with high levels of education and cultural capital (Hong, 2021; Tegan et al., 2021).

Schlagwein (2017) defines digital nomadism as a practice in which digital workers give up “settled” lifestyles in favour of travelling and working wherever they choose while utilising digital infrastructures and co-working spaces. Additionally, Aroles et al. (2022) assert that digital nomads can be thought of as a particular category of location-independent professionals. The recurrent emphasis on the feature of spatial flexibility in various conceptualisations highlights the contribution of digital nomads to the development of global mobility. In the case of a digital nomad, although this global mobility is motivated by the desire to work abroad, it also contains the interest in visiting new places as well as experiencing new cultures (Kannisto et al., 2014; Reichenberger, 2017). Furthermore, previous research has shown that the pursuit of freedom is a crucial motivation for digital nomads who reject the social constraints of settled lifestyles and material accumulation (Hong, 2021; Polson, 2019).

Given the amount of data accessible on the class and lifestyle choices of digital nomads, it is possible to classify them as members of a privileged segment of the population. However, it is important to note that despite this privileged position, digital nomads are embedded in precarious and risky employment relations due to their part-time, temporary contract works (Thompson, 2018). In this context, as argued by Shaun Busuttil (2021), the most preferred mobility patterns of digital nomads to the Global South, in countries with lower costs (i.e. Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia) can be seen as a measure to survive in precarious employment conditions. In other words, according to Busuttil (2021) digital nomadism is “more a response or neoliberal adaptation (Mancinelli, 2020) to precarious economic and employment conditions rather than the pursuit of ‘freedom’ per se.” At this point, the findings and recommendations given in the report of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) seem important. To make digital nomad employment more resilient to precarity, governments must conduct systematic studies on digital nomad visas that enable simplifying employment, social security, and tax regulations (see Benton & Hooper, 2022).

CHANGING GEOGRAPHIES OF LABOUR MIGRATION AND EMERGING FORMS OF INEQUALITY

Research conducted on the location choices of digital nomads reveals that they move in two main circuits: (1) global cities, and (2) away from global cities to new eccentric and off-the-beaten-path locations (Sternberg, 2021, p.4). While labour migration to global cities has been researched extensively in various disciplines such as sociology and geography, digital nomads raise new questions. Saskia Sassen (2005)'s valuable work pioneered the questions about the spatial organisation of capitalist production in a small number of global cities. It is possible to examine the migration of digital nomads to global cities within this context. The second issue, however, which has recently come to light and requires further study, is that of digital nomads who travel to locations that are largely rural and in remote areas far from major cities. The fact that labour mobility is focused on remote areas in the Global South, as Sternberg (2021) notes, may increase the likelihood that capitalist production will be reproduced in new places in different locations. The extension of the capitalist production to remote areas can lay the groundwork for the unavoidable rise of new forms of inequality. This is why, in accordance with Xiang's argument, the relationship between “redistribution of mobility” and inequality must be taken into account while formulating policy (see Xiang, 2022).

An American digital nomad's comments on Twitter promoting Bali as a cheap and LGBT-friendly destination drew criticism from locals and led to her deportation because she had entered the country on a tourist visa. It is a noteworthy case study to begin exploring the inequalities that migration of digital nomad might produce. According to a recent study relying on social media analysis, up to 51% of participants from Indonesia expressed negative opinions about digital nomads due to worries about cultural differences, the potential harm to locals from rising rents and standards of living, as well as the possible violation of immigration law (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021, p.85). Overlapping with these concerns, Thompson (2019, p.33) argues that digital nomads prefer to spend time with other Western tourists or expats and remain ignorant of the local culture, traditions and language. The emphasis on hedonistic life-

styles and financial/business pursuits highlights their privilege and causes difficulties in integrating with local populations. Filling up these gaps and addressing the questions of inequality between digital nomads and local communities should be a top priority for policymakers who are considering the global mobility of digital nomads.

SUGGESTION FOR A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO POLICY-MAKING

As the sociological and geographical perspectives discussed above point out, digital nomad migration contains contradictions and challenges. It is a current issue that needs to be addressed with a holistic approach to migration, both in terms of preventing the precarious labour conditions faced by the digital nomads, and the new forms of inequality that they can create in the rural and remote areas of the Global South, where they may seek to locate themselves.

It is crucial for governments who seek to enhance tourism-related revenue to address these challenges and paradoxes. According to the MPI analysis, governments that want to draw digital nomads to their countries can start by making changes to existing tourist or work visa policies, or by establishing special visas for digital nomads that permit extended stays. To avoid placing digital nomads in precarious employment status, it is advised that immigration regulations be made to include tax and social security systems in circumstances where long-term stays are a consideration. In order to prevent new forms of inequality that digital nomads could create due to their privileged status, it is necessary to conduct research about the impact and gentrification in the regions that attract digital nomads. Beyond that, new research that will encourage practices to increase mutual knowledge and experience transfer between digital nomads and local communities will significantly contribute to tackle with emerging problems of inequality. Finally, it should also be underlined that in order to launch these new research initiatives that will offer a holistic approach to international migration policies, collaborations between local governments, civic society, and academia will be of crucial importance.

DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this Commentary are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors, Editorial Board, International Organization for Migration nor John Wiley & Sons.

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