

When Migration Fails: Rethinking Maladaptation Beyond Climate Narratives in a Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Migration is widely recognized as a pathway to resilience, yet mobility does not necessarily reduce vulnerability. Under certain institutional conditions, it may instead reproduce or deepen insecurity. Maladaptation has been theorized almost exclusively in relation to climate adaptation, but it remains an underdeveloped focus for migration studies. Rather than treating maladaptation as an environmental phenomenon, this article reevaluates it as a socio-institutional process emerging through migration trajectories. This article approached studying Bangladeshi migrants in Germany and Bangladesh comparatively to each other with their secondary indicators, policy papers, and existing empirical literature. By analyzing how labor market segmentation, differential access to welfare systems, precarious forms of employment, and centralized migration governance regimes police and constrain migrants (agentive potential or adaptive capacities), the article identifies four key domains in which migrants adapt within discontinuities. Migration does not solely or simply channel resilience but can produce maladaptive trajectories that reposition vulnerability through transnational social and economic spaces. In this article, maladaptation is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional, socio-institutional process that is rooted in asymmetric structures of mobility and incorporation. In doing so, it contests adaptive migration optimism and interrogates ways of approaching environmental drivers without considering the more overarching issues of inequality, governance, and development. This article adds to comparative scholarship on migration by demonstrating the varied nature of maladaptive outcomes across institutional contexts and policy settings. Finally, it concludes by making the case for a more integrated analytical framework that would bring migration studies into closer conversation with development and governance research, arguing for addressing adaptation against the larger socio-political context evolving and influencing migration pathways.

1. Introduction

Migration is increasingly being portrayed as an adaptive response to economic fragility, ecological pressures, and social insecurity. Mobility is commonly linked to resilience and socio-economic opportunity in the field of migration and development (de Haas, 2010; McLeman & Hunter, 2010). A common framing on migration is it being a rational and adaptive response to environmental and economic pressures, mainly in discussions regarding climate change and human mobility (Black et al., 2011). These approaches have tended to present migration as a coping strategy that reduces vulnerability and boosts longer-term resilience. However, there is recently an increasingly large body of literature challenging the assumption that migration will automatically lead to positive or adaptive outcomes. Growing evidence suggests that migration pathways are highly unequal and shaped by broader structural and institutional power inequalities (Bakewell, 2010; Castles, 2010; de Haas 2021). Mobility can create opportunities for some migrants whilst also leading others into hazardous working environments, insecure legal status, social exclusion and diminished benefits. Here, migration may not only fail to reduce vulnerability but also share or amplify forms of insecurity across transnational spaces (Piper & Withers, 2018). This leads to an important question, one that has not been sufficiently analyzed in the field of migration studies: under which conditions do migration fail to be a coping strategy?

Maladaptation is a helpful framework for answering this question. Within the climate adaptation literature, maladaptation refers to adaptation responses that inadvertently increase vulnerability or undermine long-term adaptive capacity, often by shifting risks across populations, places, or time (Barnett & O'Neill, 2010; Juhola et al., 2016). Maladaptation is primarily studied in the fields of environmental governance and climate policy, where it has become known as the risk that adaptation measures produce negative impacts over different time frames or at different spatial scales (Schipper, 2020). However, the restriction of maladaptation to climate-related processes is size-reducing for its analytical scope. This leaves one free to forget how the logic of labor markets, migration governance regimes, and inequitable institutional contexts articulate with mobility outcomes.

The article argues that maladaptation should be understood as a more extensive socio-institutional process emerging through migration pathways instead of an environmental climate change event. It highlights that although migration is often framed as a form of adaptation leading to resilience in policy and adaptation discourses (Black et al, 2011; de Haas, 2021), structural contexts shape adaptive outcomes from mobility. Migration does not automatically result in better living conditions or greater insecurity; it is largely determined by access to stable work, legal protection, welfare systems, and provision of housing and social inclusion. Under conditions of unstable labor markets, fragmented social safety systems, and weak governance regimes, migration may relieve immediate pressures while generating longer-term forms of vulnerability and precarity (Standing, 2011; Piper & Withers, 2018). In this view, maladaptation is more specific than broader terms (such as exclusion or precarity) because it describes the paradoxical way that tactics designed to help populations cope will, when improperly applied, incrementally lead them to become less secure (Barnett & O'Neill, 2010; Juhola et al., 2016). Hence, migration is not inherently an adaptive mobility process because it is grounded in uneven hierarchies of institutional power and historical political-economic regimes and does not take place in a vacuum.

Instead of characterizing migration as a necessarily adaptive response, the article makes three related claims. It first questions the optimistic assumptions embedded in migration-as-adaptation debates, which often equate mobility with resilience and development. It also situates the concept of maladaptation in relation to migration governance, labor market dynamics, and wider political-economic structures, thus going beyond its environmental origins. Finally, it demonstrates that maladaptive outcomes are not universal but vary across institutional contexts, depending on migrants' access to employment, welfare systems, and legal protection. Collectively these arguments shift the analytical focus away from environmental drivers and towards the structural conditions that shape the extent to which migration ultimately enhances or undermines adaptive capacity.

The Bangladesh–Germany migration corridor provides an analytically useful case for examining how migration governance, labor market institutions, and social protection shape adaptive outcomes across transnational settings. The Bangladesh–Germany example is thus a critical study on the interface between migration, labor precarity, and institutional inequality in diverse spaces of governance (Castles et al., 2014; de Haas, 2021; Piper & Withers, 2018). Although migration from Bangladesh is associated

with aspirations to achieve upward mobility and economic security for the migrants, they continue to face exposure to segmented labor markets in destination contexts as well as traverse bureaucratic barriers and uneven access to social protection mechanisms. This reinforces migration decisions in the contexts of origin as well as the sustainability of outcomes.

The remainder of the article consists of four parts. In the second part, methodology and research design of the article is examined. The following part is about the theoretical framework of migration and maladaptation. In the fourth part, the comparative analysis that focuses on Germany and Bangladesh as case studies is examined. The empirical analysis in this part addresses how maladaptive outcomes are generated via labor market processes and as a function of migration regimes, alongside the role played by social protection differentials within the Bangladesh–Germany migration corridor. The last part draws out broader implications of the findings for this specific area of research, migration governance, and development policy moving forward.

2. Methodology and Research Design

This article adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how different institutional contexts shape migrants' adaptive capacities and contribute to maladaptive outcomes across Bangladesh and Germany. Comparative case studies are particularly well suited to investigating complex social processes because they allow researchers to examine how institutional configurations influence outcomes across different settings while remaining sensitive to contextual variation (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking to establish universal causal relationships, the article aims to develop an analytically grounded understanding of how migration governance, labour market institutions, welfare systems, and social protection shape migrants' experiences after mobility.

The analysis draws on multiple sources of secondary evidence. These include statistical indicators from Eurostat, the OECD, and the World Bank, alongside migration policy documents, published empirical studies, and comparative migration literature. Combining these different sources allows the article to examine both broader structural patterns and the institutional conditions that influence migrants' opportunities and constraints across the two national contexts. This form of qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for analysing multi-causal phenomena that cannot easily be reduced to single explanatory variables or aggregate quantitative indicators (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Adger et. al. 2013).

A comparative case study approach is especially suitable for examining maladaptation because the concept itself refers to context-dependent processes that emerge through interactions between institutions, governance arrangements, and migrants' lived realities rather than through environmental change alone. Bangladesh and Germany provide analytically contrasting cases. Bangladesh is widely recognised as a climate-vulnerable country where migration is closely connected to development aspirations, labour mobility, and environmental pressures. Germany, by contrast, represents a highly institutionalised destination characterised by regulated labour markets, comparatively extensive welfare provision, and complex migration governance. Examining these settings together makes it possible to

identify how different institutional environments shape migrants' capacity to transform mobility into longer-term adaptive outcomes.

The article adopts a comparative policy perspective to analyse how labour market regulation, migration governance, and welfare institutions influence migrants' adaptive capacities across these two contexts. The analysis does not assume that migration itself produces maladaptive outcomes. Instead, it argues that maladaptation emerges when migrants encounter unequal institutional arrangements, insecure employment, fragmented welfare provision, restrictive legal frameworks, or limited access to social protection that constrain their ability to convert mobility into sustainable improvements in wellbeing. By situating migration within broader political-economic and institutional contexts, the article reconceptualises maladaptation as a socio-institutional process rather than as an inevitable consequence of either environmental change or migration itself.

As with all comparative studies based on secondary evidence, this research does not seek to capture migrants' lived experiences directly or establish causal effects. Instead, its objective is analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018): to develop a conceptual framework that explains how different institutional settings shape adaptive and maladaptive migration trajectories. Future research drawing on interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, or longitudinal data could further refine and extend the arguments developed here.

The selection of Bangladesh and Germany follows a comparative logic aimed at exploring how maladaptive migration outcomes emerge under contrasting institutional conditions. Rather than comparing countries with similar migration systems, the article deliberately brings together two cases that differ substantially in terms of economic development, welfare provision, labour market regulation, migration governance, and institutional capacity. Such a comparison allows the analysis to move beyond country-specific observations and examine how broader institutional arrangements shape migrants' adaptive capacities (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). Bangladesh represents a context where migration is closely linked to environmental vulnerability, labor mobility, and development aspirations. Germany, in contrast, is characterised by comparatively strong institutions, regulated labor markets, and extensive social protection systems. Despite these differences, migrants in both contexts may encounter processes that undermine their ability to translate mobility into sustainable improvements in well-being. Comparing these cases therefore makes it possible to identify not whether migration is adaptive in itself, but under which institutional conditions adaptive pathways are supported or constrained. The comparison is intended to generate analytical rather than statistical generalisation by illustrating how maladaptive outcomes are produced through different configurations of governance, labour markets, and welfare institutions.

3. From Adaptation to Maladaptation

The concept of maladaptation originally emerged within climate adaptation research to describe situations in which efforts to reduce climate-related risks inadvertently increase vulnerability or weaken

adaptive capacity over the longer term (Barnett & O'Neill, 2010). Early discussions focused primarily on unintended policy outcomes and the conditions under which adaptation measures produced adverse consequences. Over time, however, the concept has evolved beyond this relatively narrow understanding. Recent scholarship has shown that maladaptation is not simply the result of poorly designed policies but also reflects broader social and institutional processes through which risks are redistributed across populations, places, and generations (Juhola et al., 2016; Magnan et al., 2016). These studies demonstrate that adaptation initiatives may reinforce existing inequalities, generate new forms of vulnerability, or transfer risks rather than reduce them.

Despite these conceptual developments, maladaptation continues to be examined largely within the fields of climate adaptation and environmental governance. Its potential relevance for migration studies has received considerably less attention. Limiting maladaptation to environmental policy overlooks the broader institutional conditions through which vulnerability is produced and reproduced. Poverty, unequal access to resources, labour market exclusion, weak governance, and political marginalisation frequently shape adaptive outcomes as much as environmental hazards themselves. Extending maladaptation beyond its environmental origins therefore offers an opportunity to better understand how migration can become associated not only with adaptation but also with the reproduction of vulnerability.

Migration research has traditionally viewed mobility as a strategy through which individuals and households diversify livelihoods, manage risk, and improve their socio-economic circumstances (de Haas, 2010; Black et al., 2011; McLeman & Hunter, 2010). Within debates on climate-related mobility, migration is often portrayed as an adaptive response that enables people to cope with environmental and economic pressures (Tacoli, 2009; Foresight, 2011). While this perspective has made an important contribution by recognizing migrants as active decision-makers rather than passive victims, it has also encouraged an assumption that mobility is inherently adaptive. Such an interpretation risks overlooking the institutional conditions that shape migrants' opportunities after movement and the structural inequalities that may limit the benefits migration is expected to generate (Bettini, 2014; Baldwin & Fornalé, 2017).

An expanding body of migration scholarship has begun to question these assumptions. Migration outcomes are shaped not only by individual aspirations but also by legal status, labor market incorporation, welfare regimes, and access to social rights (Castles et al., 2014; Piper & Withers, 2018). For many migrants—particularly those employed in low-paid sectors or living under restrictive migration regimes—mobility may involve precarious employment, insecure legal status, social exclusion, and limited access to institutional protection (Standing, 2011; Anderson, 2010). Under these conditions, migration may alleviate immediate pressures while simultaneously generating new forms of insecurity. As Bakewell (2008) argues, migration outcomes cannot be understood independently of the wider political and institutional contexts within which mobility takes place.

This article builds on these debates by proposing maladaptation as a useful analytical lens for understanding when migration fails to generate sustainable improvements in well-being. Unlike broader concepts such as precarity, which describe conditions of insecurity, maladaptation focuses on the paradox whereby strategies intended to enhance adaptive capacity may ultimately reinforce vulnerability. The concept therefore directs attention not only to migrants' experiences but also to the institutional arrangements that shape those experiences. Migration is not treated as inherently adaptive; rather, its outcomes depend on how migrants' aspirations and resources interact with labour market structures, governance arrangements, welfare institutions, and systems of social protection (Sassen, 1991; Portes & DeWind, 2007). Under supportive institutional conditions, migration may strengthen resilience. Under unequal or exclusionary conditions, however, it may reproduce or even deepen existing vulnerabilities.

Viewing migration through the lens of maladaptation also highlights how vulnerability can be transformed and redistributed across transnational spaces. When mobility fails to improve long-term security, vulnerabilities are not necessarily eliminated but may instead reappear in different forms. Migration may reduce risks for some individuals while transferring costs to other household members, communities, or future generations (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Similarly, insecure employment, fragmented welfare provision, and weak institutional protection may gradually undermine migrants' adaptive capacity despite the opportunities that migration initially appears to offer (Standing, 2011; Piper & Withers, 2018). From this perspective, migration often reconfigures vulnerability rather than simply reducing it.

Conceptualising maladaptation in this way shifts attention away from adaptation failures as isolated policy mistakes towards the broader institutional and political-economic structures through which unequal migration outcomes are produced. Comparing Bangladesh and Germany illustrates this argument particularly well. Although the two countries differ substantially in levels of development, governance capacity, and welfare provision, maladaptive outcomes emerge in both settings through different institutional mechanisms. The comparison therefore suggests that climate-related migration cannot be understood solely through environmental pressures or mobility itself. Rather, whether migration ultimately enhances or undermines adaptive capacity depends on the institutional contexts within which migrants seek to build their lives. Table 1 summarizes the main institutional dimensions through which maladaptive migration outcomes emerge across the two case studies.

Table 1
Comparative Institutional Dimensions Shaping Migration Outcomes in Bangladesh and Germany

Institutional Dimension	Bangladesh	Germany	Analytical Insight
Labour Market	Informality and underemployment	Segmentation and precarious work	Labour market incorporation shapes adaptive capacity.
Governance	Weak institutional capacity	Selective migration governance	Governance mediates migration outcomes.
Social Protection	Limited access	Conditional access	Unequal welfare reinforces vulnerability.
Legal Status	Limited migration opportunities	Temporary residence and legal insecurity	Legal status conditions long-term resilience.
Overall Outcome	Persistent vulnerability	Conditional integration	Maladaptation stems from institutional inequality rather than migration itself.

Note. Author's own conceptualization based on Barnett and O'Neill (2010), Castles et al. (2014), Standing (2011), Piper and Withers (2018), Schipper (2020), and the comparative analysis presented in this article.

The category of the “climate migrant” itself has been much debated within critical migration scholarship. As Morrissey (2012) notes, the term may imply a single environmental driver of movement, although migration decisions are often multidimensional and embedded in complex economic, political, and social pressures. For example, a household affected by flooding might also be in debt, unemployed, have insecure land ownership, be poorly supported by institutions or be losing access to public services. To treat such movement as purely climate-induced risks is to depoliticize the wider systems of inequality and exclusion that shape vulnerability and constrain adaptive capacity.

However, to acknowledge these limitations is not to diminish the importance of climate change in shaping migration patterns. In many parts of the world, environmental pressures do indeed influence mobility patterns and livelihood insecurity. But a climate exposure lens alone offers only a partial explanation for why people move and how migration outcomes play out. Instead, migration needs to be considered in broader socio-institutional and political-economic contexts that shape both vulnerability and adaptive capacity. From this perspective, maladaptation cannot be simply understood as a failure to respond well to environmental change. Rather, it is produced through unequal systems of governance, fragmented social protection, precarity of labour, and unequal access to resources that condition the experience of mobility in various contexts. From this perspective, climate change should be understood as one factor shaping migration rather than its defining explanation. Whether mobility ultimately becomes adaptive or maladaptive depends less on environmental exposure than on the institutional

conditions through which migrants are incorporated into labour markets, welfare systems, and governance regimes.

The discussion so far has argued that migration outcomes cannot be understood solely through environmental exposure or mobility itself. Whether migration enhances resilience or generates new forms of vulnerability depends largely on the institutional environments in which migrants seek to rebuild their lives. This shifts analytical attention from migration as an adaptive response to the conditions that enable—or constrain—adaptive capacity after mobility. From this perspective, adaptation is not an automatic consequence of migration but a socially differentiated process shaped by labour markets, welfare institutions, migration governance, and access to rights.

The concept of structural vulnerability provides a useful framework for understanding these uneven outcomes. Structural vulnerability refers to the social, political, and economic arrangements that systematically expose certain populations to insecurity while limiting their access to protection and resources (Quesada et al., 2011). In migration contexts, vulnerability is produced not only through environmental pressures or individual choices but also through labour market segmentation, restrictive migration policies, unequal citizenship regimes, and fragmented welfare systems (Sassen, 2014; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Rather than disappearing once migration takes place, vulnerability is often reshaped through migrants' encounters with these institutional settings. Migration therefore marks not the end of vulnerability but the beginning of a new institutional trajectory in which adaptive capacity is continuously negotiated.

This unequal distribution of institutional opportunities produces what this article conceptualises as uneven adaptation. Migrants do not experience adaptation in the same way because they do not encounter the same labor market conditions, legal protections, or welfare institutions. Adaptive outcomes therefore reflect differences in governance and institutional inclusion rather than differences in environmental exposure alone.

Recent migration scholarship increasingly questions the assumption that mobility necessarily generates resilience. Although migration may create opportunities for employment, income diversification, and social mobility, these outcomes remain highly contingent on institutional conditions (Bakewell, 2010; Castles et al., 2014). Across sectors such as agriculture, construction, logistics, domestic work, food processing, and care services, migrant labour is frequently incorporated through flexible employment arrangements that provide limited security while sustaining labor market demand (Standing, 2011; Anderson, 2010). Under these conditions, migrants often become economically indispensable while remaining socially and institutionally marginalized.

These dynamics are particularly visible among environmentally vulnerable populations. Individuals displaced by flooding, riverbank erosion, drought, or declining rural livelihoods frequently migrate in search of greater security, yet many continue to experience precarious living conditions after arrival. Research from Bangladesh, for example, shows that rural migrants moving to Dhaka commonly settle in informal neighbourhoods characterised by insecure housing, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding,

and limited access to public services (Tacoli, 2009; Etzold et al., 2014). In such settings, migration changes the location of vulnerability without necessarily reducing it. Environmental pressures therefore interact with existing inequalities in labour markets, governance, and access to resources rather than replacing them.

Migration governance further shapes these uneven adaptive outcomes. Legal status remains one of the strongest determinants of migrants' ability to secure stable employment, access welfare benefits, obtain healthcare, and participate fully in society (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). Temporary labour migration schemes, employer-sponsored visas, and restrictive asylum systems often create situations in which migrants are economically essential but politically and socially excluded. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, contemporary migration regimes organise mobility selectively, regulating migrants' rights and opportunities according to labour market demands and state priorities.

Germany illustrates that maladaptive outcomes are not confined to contexts with weak institutions. Despite its comprehensive welfare system and comparatively strong labour protections, access to these institutions remains uneven across migrant categories. Highly skilled migrants often benefit from relatively secure labour market incorporation, whereas asylum seekers, temporary workers, and many low-wage migrants continue to face bureaucratic uncertainty, insecure housing, restricted employment opportunities, and limited long-term stability (Kreichauf, 2018; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). These experiences demonstrate that the quality of institutional incorporation, rather than mobility itself, largely determines whether migration strengthens or weakens adaptive capacity.

Structural vulnerability also reflects broader global inequalities connecting migrant-sending and migrant-receiving societies. In Bangladesh, migration is shaped by the combined effects of environmental degradation, uneven development, indebtedness, and limited employment opportunities (Ayers & Forsyth, 2009; Mallick & Etzold, 2015). Yet entry into transnational labour markets does not necessarily eliminate these vulnerabilities. Many migrants remain concentrated in sectors characterised by low wages, insecure employment, and limited legal protection, reflecting wider systems that rely on flexible and inexpensive migrant labour (Castles, 2010). In this sense, migration may function simultaneously as a livelihood strategy and as a mechanism through which vulnerability is redistributed across transnational spaces.

This perspective also challenges adaptation approaches that present migration primarily as a technical response to environmental change. Critical scholarship increasingly argues that adaptation policies often prioritise migration management while paying less attention to labour exploitation, unequal development, and weaknesses in social protection systems (Felli & Castree, 2012; Bettini, 2017). As a result, policies may encourage mobility without addressing the institutional conditions that ultimately determine migrants' wellbeing. The more important question is therefore not whether migration occurs, but under what institutional conditions migrants are able to translate mobility into sustainable improvements in their lives.

Viewing migration through the lens of structural vulnerability ultimately broadens the concept of maladaptation beyond environmental policy. Maladaptive outcomes emerge not simply because migrants move, but because they encounter unequal systems of governance, labour market incorporation, welfare provision, and access to rights. Adaptation is therefore best understood as an uneven and relational process, shaped by power, institutions, and political-economic structures rather than by environmental exposure alone. This perspective shifts attention away from climate determinism and towards the institutional conditions that determine whether migration ultimately enhances resilience or reproduces vulnerability.

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1 Bangladesh

Bangladesh is frequently presented as one of the countries most exposed to climate-related mobility due to recurrent flooding, cyclones, sea-level rise, and salinity intrusion (Black et al., 2011; Islam & Winkel, 2017). These environmental pressures undoubtedly influence migration decisions, particularly in rural areas where livelihoods depend heavily on agriculture and natural resources. However, environmental stress alone does not explain why migration occurs or why its outcomes vary so substantially across households. Existing research consistently demonstrates that mobility is shaped by the interaction of environmental change with poverty, landlessness, uneven regional development, limited livelihood opportunities, and institutional constraints (Ayers & Forsyth, 2009; Mallick & Etzold, 2015; Etzold & Sakdapolrak, 2016). Climate change therefore operates within broader socio-economic structures rather than functioning as an isolated driver of migration.

These dynamics are particularly evident in patterns of internal migration to Dhaka and other rapidly expanding urban centres. Although environmental shocks frequently trigger movement from rural areas, migration rarely leads to immediate improvements in living conditions. Many migrants enter informal labour markets characterised by low wages, unstable employment, insecure housing, and limited access to public services. Research on informal settlements in Dhaka shows that environmentally displaced households often remain exposed to multiple forms of insecurity after migration, including overcrowded housing, inadequate infrastructure, and limited legal protection (Etzold et al., 2014). In this context, migration does not eliminate vulnerability; rather, vulnerability is reconfigured through new institutional and socio-economic conditions. Environmental risks are replaced by labour market insecurity, inadequate housing, and exclusion from urban services, illustrating how adaptive strategies may generate new forms of precarity.

A similar pattern can be observed in international labour migration from Bangladesh. Overseas employment has long been promoted as a pathway to economic mobility, largely through remittance generation and household income diversification (Siddiqui, 2003). While remittances undoubtedly improve the livelihoods of many families, these benefits often coexist with substantial social and institutional risks. High recruitment fees, indebtedness, restrictive labour contracts, limited legal

protection, and exploitative working conditions frequently constrain migrants' ability to translate mobility into long-term security. Consequently, migration may reduce immediate economic pressures while simultaneously creating new forms of dependence and vulnerability across transnational labour markets.

Viewed through the lens of maladaptation, the Bangladeshi case demonstrates that migration outcomes cannot be understood solely through environmental exposure. Rather, they emerge from the interaction between environmental pressures and the institutional contexts within which migration takes place. Adaptive capacity is shaped not only by the decision to move but also by migrants' subsequent access to secure employment, legal protection, social services, and opportunities for long-term inclusion. This suggests that maladaptive outcomes arise less from climate change itself than from the structural inequalities that condition migrants' experiences before and after mobility.

4.2. Germany

Germany provides an important contrast to Bangladesh because it combines relatively strong labour market institutions, an extensive welfare system, and well-developed migration governance frameworks. From an adaptation perspective, such institutional conditions might be expected to facilitate more favourable migration outcomes. However, existing research suggests that adaptive capacity remains unevenly distributed across different migrant groups, demonstrating that strong institutions alone do not guarantee resilience (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Schammann, 2018).

Access to employment, welfare benefits, and long-term security continues to depend heavily on legal status, educational background, occupational sector, and migration pathway. While highly skilled migrants often benefit from relatively stable labour market integration and broader social protection, many low-wage labour migrants, temporary workers, and asylum seekers encounter considerably more precarious conditions. Employment in sectors such as agriculture, logistics, cleaning, food processing, and care work is frequently characterised by temporary contracts, low wages, limited opportunities for career progression, and varying degrees of dependence on employers for residence or work permits. In addition, the non-recognition of foreign qualifications often constrains occupational mobility and reinforces labour market segmentation.

Institutional inequalities extend beyond employment. Although Germany possesses one of Europe's most comprehensive welfare systems, access to social protection and long-term residence remains differentiated across migrant categories. Asylum seekers and temporary migrants frequently experience bureaucratic uncertainty, restricted access to certain welfare provisions, insecure housing, and prolonged periods of legal precarity (Kreichauf, 2018; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). These conditions illustrate that institutional protection is not distributed uniformly but is mediated by migration status and legal entitlements.

Viewed through the lens of maladaptation, the German case demonstrates that vulnerability is not confined to countries with weak governance or limited institutional capacity. Rather, maladaptive

outcomes may also emerge within highly developed welfare states when institutional incorporation remains uneven. Migration may provide new opportunities for employment and social mobility, yet these opportunities are shaped by differentiated access to rights, labour market inclusion, and social protection. Consequently, adaptive outcomes depend less on the existence of strong institutions than on migrants' ability to access them on equal terms.

4.3 Comparative Discussion

The comparison between Bangladesh and Germany demonstrates that maladaptive migration outcomes cannot be explained by environmental exposure alone. Although the two countries differ substantially in their levels of economic development, institutional capacity, and migration governance, both illustrate that migration does not automatically translate into greater resilience. Instead, adaptive outcomes depend on the institutional conditions through which migrants are incorporated into labour markets, welfare systems, and broader structures of social protection.

In Bangladesh, migration frequently emerges in response to the combined effects of environmental degradation, limited livelihood opportunities, and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Yet migration often relocates rather than eliminates vulnerability, as migrants encounter informal employment, insecure housing, and limited access to public services after relocation. Germany presents a different institutional context, characterised by stronger welfare institutions and more developed migration governance. Nevertheless, access to these institutions remains uneven. Differences in legal status, labour market position, and migration pathways continue to shape migrants' opportunities for long-term social and economic integration. Although the institutional contexts differ considerably, both cases reveal that vulnerability is reproduced through unequal systems of incorporation rather than through environmental pressures alone.

These findings reinforce the argument that maladaptation should be understood as a socio-institutional process rather than solely an environmental one. Migration may reduce immediate risks associated with environmental stress or limited livelihood opportunities, but it can simultaneously generate new forms of insecurity when migrants encounter precarious employment, fragmented welfare provision, insecure legal status, or exclusion from social protection. From this perspective, maladaptation does not arise because migration fails in itself; rather, it emerges when institutional arrangements constrain migrants' ability to convert mobility into sustainable improvements in wellbeing.

The comparison also highlights the limitations of climate-centred explanations of migration. Growing attention to climate-related mobility has undoubtedly increased international awareness of the relationship between environmental change and human movement. However, framing migration primarily through climate risks may obscure the wider structural conditions that shape both migration decisions and migration outcomes. As argued throughout this article, migration is rarely driven by environmental change in isolation. Rather, it reflects the interaction of environmental pressures with labour market dynamics, governance arrangements, unequal development, and broader political-economic structures (Castles, 2010; de Haas, 2021).

This observation also has important implications for the use of categories such as *climate migrant*. While the concept has contributed to greater policy visibility, it may inadvertently simplify multidimensional migration processes by privileging environmental explanations over the broader social, political, and institutional factors that shape mobility (Morrissey, 2012; Bettini, 2014). The comparison presented here suggests that similar environmental shocks can generate very different migration outcomes depending on migrants' access to employment, legal protection, welfare systems, and institutional support. Understanding migration therefore requires moving beyond climate determinism towards a more comprehensive analysis of the structural conditions that enable—or constrain—adaptive capacity.

Taken together, the Bangladesh–Germany comparison supports the central argument of this article: migration should not be viewed as inherently adaptive or maladaptive. Rather, its outcomes are contingent upon the institutional environments within which mobility takes place. Adaptive capacity is produced through the interaction of labour markets, migration governance, welfare institutions, and broader systems of social and economic inequality. Reconceptualising maladaptation in this way extends the concept beyond its origins in climate adaptation research and positions it as a useful analytical framework for understanding how migration can simultaneously function as both a strategy of resilience and a mechanism through which vulnerability is reproduced across transnational contexts.

4.4. Comparative Evidence from Secondary Indicators

To complement the comparative discussion, this article draws on selected secondary indicators from Eurostat, the OECD, and the World Bank. These data are not intended to establish causal relationships between migration and maladaptation. Instead, they provide contextual evidence that helps situate the conceptual arguments within broader socioeconomic and institutional patterns. Read alongside the existing empirical literature, the indicators illustrate how migration outcomes are shaped by labour market conditions, welfare systems, governance arrangements, and unequal access to social protection across both origin and destination contexts.

The German case demonstrates that relatively strong institutions do not necessarily produce uniformly positive migration outcomes. OECD data show that immigrants in Germany reached an employment rate of approximately 70% in 2022, placing the country among the better-performing OECD members in terms of labour market participation. Yet employment alone provides only a partial picture of integration. The same reports continue to identify persistent inequalities in educational attainment, occupational mobility, and long-term socioeconomic integration. These findings suggest that labour market participation does not automatically translate into greater adaptive capacity when employment remains concentrated in insecure or low-paid sectors.

A similar pattern emerges from Eurostat's integration indicators. Although Germany offers comparatively extensive welfare provisions, migrants continue to experience higher risks of poverty and social exclusion than the native-born population. In 2024, 43.8% of non-EU citizens living in the European Union were classified as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 18.5% of nationals.

Eurostat also documents persistent inequalities in housing, labour market segmentation, and overqualification among migrants from outside the EU. These patterns indicate that access to institutional resources remains uneven despite the presence of comprehensive welfare institutions, reinforcing the argument that adaptive opportunities are distributed selectively rather than universally.

Administrative reports likewise point to the differentiated character of migration governance in Germany. As one of Europe's principal destination countries, Germany combines relatively developed integration policies with continuing challenges related to housing shortages, bureaucratic procedures, educational inequalities, and the labour market incorporation of low-qualified migrants. Rather than reflecting institutional failure, these tensions illustrate that even well-established governance systems generate unequal adaptive outcomes across different migrant groups.

The Bangladeshi case reveals a different configuration of structural vulnerability. World Bank indicators continue to show the importance of agriculture and other climate-sensitive sectors within the national economy, while informal employment remains widespread. Rapid urbanisation has increased pressures on cities such as Dhaka, where many migrants relocate following environmental shocks or declining rural livelihoods. Yet migration into urban areas frequently leads to insecure employment, limited access to formal housing, and weak social protection. Mobility therefore reduces some immediate environmental risks while exposing migrants to new forms of socioeconomic insecurity.

A similar pattern can be observed in international labour migration. Migration has long been promoted as a strategy for livelihood diversification and poverty reduction through remittances. Nevertheless, secondary evidence indicates that many Bangladeshi migrants continue to enter highly segmented global labour markets characterised by temporary contracts, weak labour protections, and limited welfare provision. While migration may improve household income, it can also generate new forms of dependence, indebtedness, and insecurity that extend across transnational spaces. These findings reinforce the argument that migration outcomes depend not only on movement itself but also on the institutional environments within which migrants work and live.

Taken together, the secondary indicators strengthen the comparative analysis developed throughout this article. Although Bangladesh and Germany differ substantially in terms of economic development and institutional capacity, both cases demonstrate that adaptive outcomes are mediated by governance arrangements, labour market structures, and access to social protection. Vulnerability cannot therefore be understood solely through environmental exposure or mobility itself. Rather, it is continuously shaped by the institutional conditions that determine whether migrants are able to translate mobility into long-term security. In this sense, the secondary evidence supports the article's central argument that maladaptation is best understood as a socio-institutional process emerging through unequal systems of incorporation rather than as a direct consequence of climate change alone.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has argued that migration should not be considered adaptive. Migration has often been described in policy and academic discussions as a form of adaptation to environmental change and socioeconomic insecurity (Black et al., 2011; McLeman & Hunter, 2010), but the findings presented here indicate that adaptive outcomes depend on the institutional environments in which mobility occurs. This article has demonstrated that it is labour market structures, migration governance, legal status and access to social protection which are central to whether migration reduces or reproduces vulnerability, rather than treating migration itself as a pathway to resilience.

This analysis makes three important contributions to migration scholarship. First, it broadens the notion of maladaptation beyond its traditional use in climate adaptation research. Prior research has mainly used maladaptation as a concept for an unintended effect of environmental adaptation policies (Barnett & O'Neill, 2010; Juhola et al., 2016; Schipper, 2020). This article contends that maladaptation offers a useful analytical lens to understand migration outcomes. From this perspective, maladaptation is not merely a failure to respond effectively to environmental change. It is, rather, a socio-institutional process through which migration, although pursued as a strategy to improve well-being, may reproduce, or even intensify, existing forms of insecurity.

Secondly, the article questions climate-reductionist explanations of migration. Environmental change certainly plays a role in migration decisions in many parts of the world, especially where countries are affected by recurrent climate-related hazards. Yet environmental pressures alone cannot account for why migration leads to such different outcomes for different people in different contexts. The comparison between Bangladesh and Germany demonstrates that similar aspirations for security and socioeconomic improvement can lead to very different experiences depending on the institutional conditions encountered before and after migration. Climate exposure may trigger mobility, but it does not dictate its outcomes. Those consequences are mediated by governance arrangements, labour market incorporation, legal protections and welfare institutions.

This perspective also calls into question optimistic assumptions in parts of the migration–development literature. Discussions of migration as adaptation tend to focus on remittances, livelihood diversification, and resilience-building while giving relatively less consideration to the structural conditions that influence the everyday lives of migrants (de Haas, 2010; Bettini, 2017). The evidence in this article suggests that migration often shifts rather than erases vulnerability. In Bangladesh, environmental stress is combined with poverty, informal employment and limited institutional protection. Even in Germany, where the welfare institutions are comparatively more developed, many migrants face segmented labor markets, insecure residency status, housing shortages, and unequal access to long-term social inclusion. These findings show that adaptive capacity is unevenly distributed, rather than automatically generated through mobility.

A key implication of this article is that migration outcomes should be understood as institutionally mediated rather than environmentally determined. Structural vulnerability does not disappear when people cross borders or move within countries. Rather, it is reshaped by new institutional arrangements

which may either extend or limit the opportunities available to migrants. Temporary and flexible migrant labor, fragmented welfare systems, restrictive migration governance, and differentiated legal statuses all shape the capacity of migrants to translate mobility into sustainable improvements in well-being. Thus maladaptation should be seen not as an exceptional outcome but as a possible outcome of unequal systems of incorporation.

These findings also have important policy implications. Migration policies increasingly recognize mobility as a component of climate adaptation strategies, particularly within international policy frameworks concerned with climate resilience and sustainable development (IOM, 2019). Policies that facilitate movement but do not address institutional inequalities risk perpetuating the very vulnerabilities they seek to overcome, however. Supporting mobility itself might be as vital as increasing legal migration pathways, strengthening labor protections, improving access to social protection and reducing barriers to long-term social inclusion. Adaptation policies must therefore extend beyond the facilitation of migration and focus on creating institutional conditions that allow migrants to find durable security.

The comparative approach adopted in this article also shows the value of bringing migration studies into closer dialogue with development studies and political economy. Instead of viewing migration as an isolated demographic process, the analysis places mobility within larger systems of inequality linking sending and receiving societies. This view emphasizes that adaptive capacity is generated across transnational institutional spaces rather than within any one national context. Understanding maladaptation therefore requires a focus on how inequalities are reproduced through interactions between states, labor markets, migration regimes, and global economic structures.

Some limitations should also be acknowledged at the same time. The analysis is based mainly on secondary literature, comparative policy documents, and international statistical indicators. Although these sources offer important insights into the institutional patterns that shape migration outcomes, they are unable to fully capture the lived experiences of migrants or the diversity of individual migration trajectories. Future research would benefit from qualitative fieldwork and longitudinal studies exploring how migrants themselves navigate adaptation, insecurity, and institutional barriers across different migration corridors. Comparative studies involving a greater number of origin and destination countries would also be useful for assessing the generalizability of the conceptual framework proposed here.

Finally, this article suggests that future debates should move beyond the question of whether migration is adaptation. The more productive question concerns the institutional conditions under which migration becomes adaptive or maladaptive. Moving beyond environmental drivers alone to the political, economic, and institutional contexts that shape mobility allows us to develop a more nuanced understanding of migration in an era of climate change and global inequality. Rather than conceptualizing maladaptation as an environmental phenomenon, this article seeks to foster a more critical and interdisciplinary research agenda that brings migration studies into closer dialogue with governance, development and political economy scholarship through a reconceptualization of maladaptation as a socio-institutional process.

Declarations

Author Contribution

As a single author; I wrote the main manuscript text, prepared the figure and reviewed the manuscript.

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