

## VoicesOnTheMove\_EP03 Transcript

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*Kwabena:* People like to stay in this community because of business, because of being in nature, being part of the community. Only when they find out that businesses are not growing here, they run away.

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*Mumuni Abu:* If you go deeper into the analysis, you realize that the main reason for migration is economic, but the main economic activity is also related to the environment.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Ever wonder what it would take to make your home no longer habitable? It's a tricky question, right? Today we're diving into what binds people to their communities, or alternatively, drives them from their homes. We'll be heading to Ghana and Mali, two West African nations with populations that have always been pretty mobile. There we will explore the complex interplay between environmental and economic factors that influence migration decisions. We'll also see how economic activities are often closely tied to people's environments, particularly for those who rely on agriculture.

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*Kwabena:* When I first came to this community, I started farming. It is a village surrounded by small villages. A place where people come to do farming. I cleared about 75 acres. People were sewing and laughing, thinking that they will get more harvest here. Because the earlier you plant, the greater the chance you will get a big harvest, a bumper harvest. So we were hoping. But then there was a drought in June and July. Sixty days without rain. There was the first year I couldn't get anything. The second year the water came, a lot of rain. The third year there was a flood. I was told that I'd go bankrupt. And I totally did go bankrupt.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* In Ghana's Akatsi North district, a rural area, agriculture is not only the main livelihood, but a way of life for over two thirds of its residents. Kwabena, the farmer and tree planter we've just heard is one of them. Environmental challenges like droughts that Kwabena experienced are key underlying factors for migration from northern Ghana to the country's so-called "middle belt".

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*Mumuni Abu:* This is a typical agrarian community. They are basically engaged in agricultural activities.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* This is Dr. Mumuni Abu. Mumuni is part of the HABITABLE project team.

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*Mumuni Abu:* Some of the community members are also engaged in fishing. So

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basically, the kind of activities that they do are climate sensitive because the kind of agriculture they do is rainfed. And so once you have climate issues, then people within this area become more or less trapped in a very difficult situation.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Dr. Abu is from the Regional Institute for Population Studies at the University of Ghana. Ghana's climate is projected to become even hotter, with more intense rains in the wet season and increased dryness in the dry periods. Despite this, very few Ghanaians who migrate actually cite environmental factors as their main motivators. Instead, a significant majority, nearly 72%, point to the pursuit of job opportunities, education, and family as their primary reasons for leaving.

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*Mumuni Abu:* Climate issues are usually subsumed under other kinds of economic or social forms of migration. So the statistics isn't that much encouraging. You just have between 10 to 15%, indicating that their migration was environmentally related. If you go deeper into the analysis, you realize that, uh, a significant number of the population may indicate that their main reason for migration is economic. If you go behind the economic, you realize that the main economic activity is also related to the environment. So once you start doing those reclassification, then you can have over 50% indicating that this form of migration is environmental or climate related.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Many people who have grown up in rural areas have a close connection to the land.

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*Kwabena:* This place - most areas here are very rocky, very stony. It's not easy to plant a tree. Last year I planted six different kinds, but when you go to the land, how many plants survive? I don't even see one. That's bad. So is it my fault? No, it's the land.

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*Mumuni Abu:* Most of these rural communities formally will blame everything that happens in the environment to the acts of God. Because for them, in terms of rainfall or whatever, is the act of God. But today, if you speak to them, they also relate some of the things to their own kind of activities.

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*Kwabena:* So now the bushes are all banned. Even young trees are being cut down. People don't know the dangers. Many people don't plant trees, but rather cut them down to farm, to build a house, in order to make a living. There is a saying, "The day the last living plant dies is the day the last human will die". If you ask me, I think the people should stop doing things that destroy the environment.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Awareness of man-made climate change is growing. Yet for

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those in rural areas who depend directly on firewood or available land for cultivation, it remains particularly challenging to prevent deforestation and develop alternative livelihoods locally. In Ghana, seasonal migration and the flow between rural and urban areas has always been the norm. This movement tends to be more circular than linear, contrasting with the one directional rural to urban migration narrative, often highlighted by the media. Dr. Mumuni Abu has set out in search of answers to these questions.

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*Mumuni Abu:* So it's males who are encouraged initially to migrate. When they get into Accra, Kumasi, some engage in what we call scrap business. So they buy these, uh, metals and then they sell to steel companies to make money. They also help in offloading goods from vehicles, some are also engaged in petty trading within the city. So that is what most of the men engage in when they move out of farming. But what we have observed in recent times from the Savannah is that both males and females migrate. With the females when they get to Accra or Kumasi, they engage in head porting. So they are basically around the central markets and they make a lot of money out of that. So a lot of the females are independently migrating from the Savannah without necessarily being supported. Some even sneak out of their own household just to be able to get to the southern part of Ghana. The belief is that when you migrate as a female, you have that independence to be able to take your own decisions. You take decisions on what to do with your money.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* So what does this new form of independence mean for women, and what are the consequences for families when seeking alternatives elsewhere? Traditionally, safety concerns, limited access to resources, and societal norms about gender roles and expectations have restricted women's mobility and opportunities. However, the necessity to diversify household livelihoods is gradually transforming these roles. With the decision to migrate comes the challenge of earning a living and becoming successful in a new place for both men and women.

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*Kwabena:* People become furious. Most farmers, they go to farm with all that they have. They even go and borrow, and your landlord doesn't know that you went bankrupt. He doesn't know that rain ruined your crops. So definitely at the end of the day, he will be standing and asking you to pay back. This brings people back into poverty. Those who farm and could not get anything. They have to run away and start life somewhere else. Because in this place, there's only farming. If you don't run away, you'll end up like your father and mother.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Seeking new sources of income in cities can be an effective strategy for adapting to worsening climate conditions in rural areas. However, this migration is not always permanent.

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*Mumuni Abu:* So in terms of the positive aspects of migration, most of these migrants, usually go back to their communities, and there is also the cultural belief that you are more recognized from wherever you hail from. So they want to go back to these areas. Their contribution to the rural kind of development is immeasurable, because some of these migrants are practically paying the school fees of family members. Some of the women are going back as hairdressers, some going back, are dressmakers. They set up in the rural environment, and then they also change the kind of lifestyle that goes on within the rural community. Even in terms of agriculture, some of them still work within these urban areas, and buy all the agrochemicals, send them to the rural areas, and follow up and ensure that their lands are prepared, the chemicals are well applied and all that.

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*Kwabena:* So our young men and women are in the cities in Kumasi or in Accra doing metal work there. They are influenced. Sometimes a friend or a neighbor has migrated and made it, and they would also like to succeed, many, many of them. Some of them are able to make it, providing for their parents and families with what they earn. They come back and build houses with 2 or 3 rooms. They buy motorbikes also for the family. Others return from the city without anything, and they will come and talk to you and say, hey, can you lend me this? Can I have that? I want this. Some of them are going around and stealing motorbikes. They don't recognize your culture anymore. These people who could not make it, the migrants. If you don't make a lot of money, it's hard to go back to your village. You will feel ashamed to go back because you do not have anything. This can lead to some illegal activities such as stealing other people's goods.

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*Mumuni Abu:* If you are a migrant and then you go into such a community with such a behavior, it will become very difficult for you because it's something that they are not going to accept, that you probably have learned as a result of migration. So yes, you may have migrants who have invested, but they cannot integrate into the village community, because when you come there people see you as an outsider. Within the rural area they have their own kind of living, and there are certain lifestyles that they don't accept.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Migration not only reshapes the economic landscape of communities, but also the social fabric. Returning migrants often bring back different perspectives and lifestyles, which can introduce divisions and new dynamics within traditionally close knit communities.

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*Mumuni Abu:* We realized that when we talk of habitability, it goes beyond the physical infrastructure. It also has to do with the social networks that one has. The

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kind of cultural systems that one is able to fit in. And then we are more interested in how migration contributes to this whole concept of habitability. It's very tricky determining "threshold" because sometimes what you may classify as not habitable, it may not necessarily be uninhabitable to some people. and we may see a certain kind of culture and classify that culture, probably under a certain kind of domain. That may not necessarily be the case. For all you know, that is their culture. So these are concepts that are very fluid and we need to be very careful the way we actually use them.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* This is why we need to better understand the social factors that can contribute to making places feel uninhabitable, and not just the economic or environmental ones. You are listening to Voices on the Move. A podcast on how climate changes migration.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* The fact that migrants often play a significant role in economically supporting their communities of origin is generally seen in a positive light. However, successfully reintegrating into these communities remains a separate challenge. For most of the people affected, migration isn't a simple choice between staying or going. It's an adaptation strategy that comes with a mix of challenges and outcomes for both individuals and their communities. This leads us to wonder, what makes people stay? What keeps their places of origin habitable for them amidst ever evolving environmental changes?

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*Mumuni Abu:* I think it all boils down to the way agriculture is being packaged. Nobody wants to engage in agriculture these days and go under the scorching sun and probably go and farm from morning to evening. They look at their parents, they look at their grandparents, and they see it not to be attractive because it's a sign of being poor. But if agriculture is converted into a kind of a business, okay, if you have an agribusiness where people can really, uh, have a mechanized kind of system to be able to produce their goods, have very good markets where they can sell it and make good money out of it, I'm sure most of the young ones who want to engage in that kind of agriculture. There is a particular program where they call planting for food and jobs, and within that particular program, farmers are supposed to be supported. The challenge is, uh, the extent to which this has been able to reach the needed farmers. Technically, it hasn't reached most of them.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* To cope with environmental degradation, temporary migration, seasonal and alternative work in cities, and sending remittances and knowledge back home are common adaptation strategies in Ghana.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Now we turn our focus to the Republic of Mali, a West African

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nation with a very young population, almost half or under the age of 15. For decades, Mali has been characterized by increased economic instability. Nearly half of its population lives in extreme poverty and security concerns. This is due to ongoing internal conflicts and the spread of religious extremism and more frequent Jihadist revolts. According to IOM's 2023 Displacement Index, more than 375,000 Malians are internally displaced. Landlocked and frequently hit by drought, Mali has long seen migration as a vital response to its environmental and economic challenges, and we do mean long. Its roots go back to the fourth century. Limited employment opportunities and low wages have led many Malians to seek work abroad in neighboring countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Algeria, and Libya. Our story takes us to the Sikasso region in southern Mali where we meet Madou.

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*Madou:* I'm a native of Kignan. That is why I'm so attached to it. I'm 70 years old. I come from Kignan. I became a farmer from father to son. When I was a young man, life in Kignan was easy. It even was an agricultural production zone for excellence. We had access to water of good quality. In the past, it used to rain heavily. The two swamps were filled all year round, and the water from there was used to grow vegetables. There was plenty of grass around for the animals to graze on. Mangos were ripe during the harvesting season and there was an abundance of rare fruits and vegetables. Our region was self-sufficient in food and there was great solidarity in our community.

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*Sidy Boly:* Mali is facing some environmental challenges. Increasingly, people in rural areas that are facing some degradation of soils there are facing droughts. They're facing desertification.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Siti Boly, from the National Institute of Statistics of Mali, is also one of the researchers in the HABITABLE project. He has conducted research on the environmental challenges faced by people in the rural areas of Mali.

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*Sidy Boly:* Because we are part of the Sahara, we don't have much rainfall and even workers in other sectors are also suffering because some of them depend on natural resources such as forestry and fishing, and they can experience disruptions in their work due to environmental changes.

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*Madou:* Nowadays, it's excessively hot. The swamps and wells dry up, most of the time. There's a drastic drop in rainfall, so we have problems accessing water and the crops are not adequately watered anymore. For 50 years, the river in our village has always been filled with water. Now it is dry.

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*Sidy Boly:* When I asked him to explain me the reason of that, he mentioned that it is because of the climate change. In local language, we call it climate change (Bambara word for climate change). So I think there is a kind of change that everyone is witnessing here.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Economically, the fertile lands of the Sikasso region are celebrated for their agricultural productivity, particularly in the cultivation of crops like millet, sorghum, and cotton. The region's economy has always played a significant role in the Trans-Saharan trade routes. Nowadays, Sikasso experiences substantial internal migration, primarily driven by rural to urban movements. This is especially the case for young people, who often migrate to Sikasso City, the regional capital, in search of better economic opportunities, education, and improved living conditions.

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*Madou:* Children migrate in search of economic opportunities to send money home. I have three sons and only one of them is still in Kignan. In the old days, our brothers used to emigrate, only to return when the rainy season approached. Nowadays, when young people go abroad, they don't come back. My age doesn't allow me to emigrate and I don't intend to do so. I manage somehow, and there are people in the community who support me. I want to do business, but I don't have the financial means to do so myself. I am not satisfied with the way I'm currently able to provide for my family. Men who no longer produce well are increasingly helped by women, and so women take on other activities such as trading, or they work as braiders or porters in the cities.

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*Sidy Boly:* Women generally don't have access to, to land, and even when they have access to land, they have just a small part of land, so their productivity is not that high. So they can try to create a kind of cooperative so they can grow crops together and sell them.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* As we've seen in Ghana, women often face restrictions on their mobility due to traditional gender roles and societal expectations and thus have to develop new ways of cooperation.

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*Madou:* Fruit and vegetable prices increased rapidly, so I took the initiative of planting trees, fruit trees. I was already able to plant 70 and I still have 40 to plant. I've planted mango, lemon, and orange trees. I can't say that I'm making the most of the work I do, but I hope I will in the future. According to my observations, the way it's been hot this year and what the trees are showing us, we're expecting an abundant rainy season compared to last year.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* For Madou, farming remains the most important source of income and the livelihood of his choice. But in an environment that is heavily impacted by climate change, farmers need support.

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*Madou:* Agricultural work is not easy. Where we are now, we need to change seed products and cultivation methods so we'll be able to minimize the difficulties we are experiencing. We need seeds and tractors to increase our agricultural production and withstand the effects of climate change. If all the players join hands, it can help us. Also, a better road infrastructure is needed to facilitate the trade of goods between Kignan and other localities. For my tree plantation, I need a water supply system. We need water points. The tree planting association that we have set up can also contribute to these actions. If we have access to a sufficient supply of water, we can do a lot of things, but we need support so we can do more.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* Another challenge is the tradition of sending young people to cities, or even abroad, to support their families back home, a practice that's also common in Ghana.

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*Sidy Boly:* What people sometimes complain about in some villages, okay, is a shortage of labor, because when there are a lot of people who migrated in communities, it can impact through the activity of farming activities so the yields can decrease. But migrants who moved to other regions within Mali or even abroad often send money back to their families, which can contribute to household income, support local businesses and economic activities in communities. So the government has to try to make some investments in the rural areas so that young people can stay. They want mbetter living conditions.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* So a broader understanding of sustainable adaptation strategies is needed to develop a future agenda for young people.

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*Sidy Boly:* There is a kind of inequality in terms of access to resources, because when you are a chief of a village, you can own a lot of land. I think the government can also try to fight such inequalities so that people can have equal access to resources.

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*Mumuni Abu:* If government is able to properly improve on the irrigation projects within these areas and support some of these farmers with incentives, I think they will still be able to do very well in terms of their farming activities.



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*Sophia Burton (Host):* What the research of Mumuni Abu, Sidy Boly, and their colleagues from the HABITABLE project shows us, is that the concept of habitability extends beyond purely physical or environmental conditions. It's also about the social factors that influence whether people stay or move. Tune in to our next episode, where we'll return to Ghana and dive deeper with the HABITABLE research team into these complex dynamics.

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*Sophia Burton (Host):* And that wraps up this episode of Voices on the Move. Thank you to the researchers sharing their insights with us, Dr. Mumuni Abou and Sidy Boly. And thank you to Kwabena and Madou and all the people who've shared their personal experiences with us. To protect their privacy, we've changed their names. Check out the show notes for further links to the research that informed this episode and visit [habitableproject.org](http://habitableproject.org). HABITABLE is an EU funded project that aims to significantly advance our understanding of the interlinkages between climate change impacts, migration, and displacement patterns in order to better anticipate how they will evolve in the future. Voices on the Move is a podcast series developed by Migration Matters, York University, Samuel Hall, and the HABITABLE research project. The podcast is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and HABITABLE, an EU funded horizon 2020 research project. It is hosted by the Dahdaleh Institute for Global Health Research at York University. Our producer and senior story editor is Bernadette Klausberger. Our editorial team includes Frankie Reid, Eline van Oosterhout, and Selma Blanken. The series is edited by Line Schulz. Audio engineering and sound design by Tim Strasburger-Schmidt and Eduard Hutuleac. Studio facilities provided by alias film und sprachtransfer. The voice actors in this episode are Leo Skozowski and Jeff Burrell. I'm Sophia Burton, your host. Until next time with more Voices on the Move.