This innovative volume develops an intriguing new conceptual framework on forced migration at the outset of a multi-year project undertaken by the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University. “Humanitarian crises” are defined in a broad sense, as “any situation” (i.e. an acute crisis or a situation arising from slow-onset changes) “in which there is a widespread threat to life, physical safety, health or basic subsistence that is beyond the coping capacity of individuals and the communities in which they reside” (Martin, Weerasinghe and Taylor, at 5). Particular emphasis is put upon crises that exceed the competent state’s ability to protect its population, thus requiring international assistance (id. at 19). Humanitarian crises impact internal and international migration in various ways, including sometimes by impeding migration. The editors distinguish in particular three “principal ways in which humanitarian crises affect movement”: “displacement,” “anticipatory movement” and “relocation for trapped populations” in need of resettlement (id. at 11). The volume does not propose any new normative framework – the issues highlighted are mostly issues of implementation rather than normative gaps, and, as Jane McAdam recognizes, the conceptual framework “is arguably too blunt … to drive a single legal or normative response” (at 32). Nevertheless, contributors highlight the possible use of the concept of crisis migration for political advocacy (id. at 31) and the need for “the coherent consolidation of existing norms and practices and the better coordination of existing organizations” (Betts at 365).

The volume features some of the leading authorities in the field; it includes two theoretical chapters, followed by 10 case studies, four chapters discussing specific categories of “at-risk populations” (non-citizen migrants, “trapped” populations, migrants by sea and urban migration), and a final chapter on governance aspects. The contributions explore a wide array of situations of “crisis,” including persecution, conflicts, criminal violence, environmental factors (such as flooding, drought, and extreme weather events – some of which might be related to climate change), epidemics and pandemics, and recurring disasters of diverse sorts affecting the same country (e.g. in Haiti). While health crises mostly lead to travel restrictions, other crises may result in spontaneous or organized migration, before or during the crisis, including through programs of involuntary resettlement. Beyond migration, some of the issues discussed throughout the volume are common to humanitarian assistance in general – in particular affected states’ lack of capacity, inadequate protection policies, as well as, possibly, their unwillingness to protect certain populations. Some contributors insist on the relevance of broader circumstances, noting that a focus on crises “risks side-lining ‘everyday,’ systemic issues such as poverty, vulnerability and environmental fragility, which are central to how people experience hazards” (McAdam at 30).

In the context of ongoing discussions on the governance of “climate migration” (in which numerous contributors have actively participated), this volume seemingly reflects an attempt at doing away with causality in migration studies (e.g. Martin, Weerasinghe and Taylor, at 10). Like Alexander Betts’ own concept of “survival migration” but with a greater emphasis on internal mobility, “crisis migration” sheds light on the protection needs of individuals displaced by virtually any compelling factors. Yet, it paradoxically continues to attribute migration to a sort of cause – the “crisis,” even though defined very broadly – rather than, more abstractly, to any form of migration. Thus, the reader may wonder what speaking about “crisis migration” really adds to the more common concept of “forced migration.” A few non-crisis situations of forced migration (most obvious development-induced displacement and resettlement) are possibly let aside, but this does not seem to be the purpose of the editors in developing a new conceptual framework. On the other hand, it is certainly problematic to distinguish “forced” migrants from “voluntary” ones because migration is always at the same time a matter of choice and compulsion; yet there is also no clear-cut line between what constitutes a “crisis” and what does not, or between what migration can or cannot be attributed to such a crisis. For instance, could great misery be considered as a looming humanitarian crisis? As Elizabeth Ferris notes, “[h]oly most indicators Haiti has been in crisis almost since its independence in 1804, and migration has been an essential part of Haitians’ strategies for coping with their situation” (at 91). Case studies also show that crises may also exacerbate “voluntary” (i.e. not fully coerced) migration, in particular through indirect economic
pathways (e.g. Aljuja, at 124). It is not clear, at this stage, whether the conceptual framework of crisis migration could help solving these classical conundrum in migration studies, or, else, what else it could bring really contribute to the existing concepts. However, more will certainly be clarified in forthcoming works conducting within the same research project.

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