THE MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE NEXUS

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In recent years, the terms "climate refugee" or "environmental refugee" have featured heavily in news media and popular commentary. Often, such terms are accompanied by shockingly large numbers, referring to everything from current migration levels to future "climate refugee" predictions. While the topic of migration and climate change is of undoubted importance, these ways of approaching the issue oversimplify the complex reality of climate change and distort its relationship to migration. Moreover, by ignoring the various connections between migration and climate change, such narrow framings jeopardize prospects for creating policies that address the root causes leading people to leave their homes. Alarmist and reductive headlines calling attention to enormous flows of people migrating could be contributing to the treatment of migration as a security threat.

At the same time, training attention solely on those who migrate across borders may make us lose sight of those who need relief inside their countries. Many such people often wish to return to their homes once conditions allow, or perhaps resettle in other parts of their own country. Understanding that the link between environmental changes and migration is mediated by socioeconomic, political, and humanitarian contexts can help us better recognize migrants' decision-making—as well as the barriers and enablers of migration—in a way that can guide policies by taking into account the wishes, needs, and opportunities of those affected. Therefore, it is important to shift the focus from stopping the arrival of so-called "climate refugees" towards a better understanding of the nexus between climate change and migration.

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Protest sign from a 2019 climate change rally.

who is a refugee?

The word "refugee" is frequently misused in the context of climate change. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines a refugee as "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence." None of these scenarios includes displacements directly related to climatic or environmental change. Persons displaced due to environmental phenomena are generally not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention adopted by the United Nations and

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the protections provided under international refugee law, such as the right to apply for asylum.

Existing national or international legislation rarely grants asylum protections to these "climate refugees." Similarly, courts of law tend not to grant asylum to immigrant persons impacted by extreme weather events in their home countries. For instance, a family from a small island state in the Pacific (Tuvalu) once claimed asylum in New Zealand based on humanitarian needs related to climate change. Courts rejected these claims, instead granting them asylum because of family connections. In another case, New Zealand's national Courts of Justice denied an asylum claim based on the effects of sea-level rise by a citizen from Kiribati, another small island state. In this case, the applicant was forced to go back to Kiribati in 2015. A UN Human Rights Committee ruled that this deportation did not violate the applicants' right to life. However, this ruling recognized for the first time that "environmental degradation, climate change, and unsustainable development" constitute threats to the effective enjoyment of the right to life. Furthermore, the Committee's ruling suggests that sending individuals back to countries where they will face climate-related harm can constitute a violation of the non-refoulement principle, which protects individuals from being sent into a country in which they will face considerable danger.

While there is hardly any real legal protection for climate-related migrants, some researchers, as well as international proposals (e.g., the Nansen Initiative), have advocated for creating an international convention that protects people who are displaced because of climate change. Other experts have noted that policymakers should be cautious before treating climate-related migration as a type of forced migration similar to those of refugees or asylum seekers who emigrate because of violence or persecution.

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The term "climate refugee" evokes awareness and concern for the plight of those affected but it also can create a sense of fear and rejection for potential receiving countries.

Persons displaced due to environmental phenomena are generally not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention adopted by the United Nations and the protections provided under international refugee law, such as the right to apply for asylum.

The term "climate refugee" emphasizes the cross-border dimension of climate migration, and this focus overlooks those who migrate within their countries. This term also suggests that those who move will cross international boundaries and achieve some form of legal protection in another country. While climate change is pushing people to leave their homes, especially in the Global South, most do so within their own countries. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimated that in 2017 18.8 million people were displaced by geophysical and weather-related disasters. A 2018 report by the World Bank projects that, without concrete climate action, by 2050, climate change could force more than 143 million people to move within their own countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. And those who cross a border are unlikely to achieve asylum status due to climate-related harm.

To find alternative terms to climate or environmental refugees, the IOM put forward in 2007 a working definition of "environmental migrants." Accordingly, environmental migrants, "predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad." This definition encompasses the possibility that the migration might be forced or not and that it happens within and across borders. Other researchers prefer to talk about "climate mobilities" (rather than migration) to account for the different types of moves (e.g., internal, international, short and long term, forced or voluntary) that are linked to the changing climate.

So, while it is clear that climate change is having a tremendous impact on human mobility, the full range of climate-related migration is not captured by the term "climate refugee." Indeed, the term risks overlooking those who migrate internally, and it may lead to confusion over who can—and likely will—receive protection under international refugee law.

the challenge of a narrow focus on climate-related migration

But the problem of approaching climate-related migration as a "refugee crisis" does not only rest in the terminology; it

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While climate change is experienced globally, it manifests differently at the local level.

It is not uncommon to find media headlines that describe "climate refugees" in vague and shocking terms. Such headlines sometimes compel the reader to think of migrants as vulnerable groups that come en masse. Other times, migrants are described as coming in large numbers, suggesting that they represent a crisis or a security threat to established democracies. While climate-related migration is a serious challenge that is likely to increase in salience over time, an alarmist approach that does not take into account its complexity could be counterproductive. These approaches to climate-related migration could be contributing to the increasing adoption of security measures in borderlands. In recent decades, there has been a dramatic increase in border securitization globally—as the triplication of border walls since the late 1990s shows. Such measures are unlikely to truly address the issue of climate change migration (or migration in general). In fact, there is little evidence that borders stop migration of any kind.

In addition, those who are affected by climate change but still decide to stay in their homes are hardly mentioned in media reports. But those who stay are very important for understanding climate change migration. Among other things, they show the complexities of decision-making when it comes to staying or leaving, and so we should also be thinking more carefully about them. For example, when communities are affected by climate change, are those who stay in their homes the ones who are equipped with sufficient resources to cope with environmental change? Or are they those who cannot afford traveling and therefore have no other option? The answer to these questions is likely "it depends," as is true for most aspects of climate change migration.

also lies in its narrow focus. This framing tends to place all the attention on 1) migrant vulnerability and disempowerment and 2) climate change as the only cause. While accurate as far as it goes, this framing does not attend to the perspectives of those who experience the impacts of climate change. Thus, issues such as "place attachment" or the "multi causality of environmental migration"—which actual migrants experience—are often ignored in media reports.

Therefore, some researchers have called attention to the limitations of labeling environmental migrants as "climate refugees." Migrants themselves sometimes echo this call. To give an example, some communities in small island states—which are more likely to suffer the effects of climate change—seem to think that the term "refugee" diverts consideration from the complexity of environmental migration. A 2018 study written by Nikita Perumal from Columbia University conducted in the island state of Vanuatu observes that interviewees did not find the label "refugee" an appropriate description of their situation. The solid cultural connections that inhabitants of Vanuatu have with their land, for instance, appear left out of the "refugee" classification. Similarly, a 2012 study authored by Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus from the University of Wollongong (Australia) explains that the Tuvaluans' understanding of the links between climate change and migration does not match the standard media narrative of "climate refugees." In all these cases, cultural, economic, and political specificities augment the environmental drivers of migration.

The narrow focus on climate-related migration is also manifested in unreflective calls emphasizing alarming information.

Migration linked to the environment can take many forms, but the homogenizing tendencies of the concept "climate refugee" risk leaving out most of these nuances.

the multidimensional implications of the migration and climate change nexus

Migration and climate change are phenomena that manifest in multiple dimensions. For starters, there are many different types of migration. In the *spatial* dimension, as we discussed

above, there are international migrants and internal migrants. The latter are most abundant when it comes to climate-related migration. Along the *temporal* dimension, migration can be seasonal, circular, or permanent, or happen in a stepwise manner. Migrants also differ along the *demographic* dimension. People who leave their home communities tend to meet similar demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, or education level), known as selective migration. Finally, there is a *legal or administrative* dimension to migration. For instance, transnational migrants who have visas or legal permits issued by the receiving states are labeled as documented migrants. These migrants are typically allowed to stay in the receiving state for a specific period.

On the other hand, those who lack such legal permits are known as undocumented migrants. In addition, there are stateless migrants—individuals who lack any form of citizenship. In the context of climate-related migration, those exposed to extreme weather events may be subjected to temporary evacuation orders. In other cases, entire communities can be induced to planned relocation. And we can also talk about migration being forced and voluntary, although the distinction is sometimes blurry. This means that migration linked to the environment can take many forms, but the homogenizing tendencies of the concept "climate refugee" risk leaving out most of these nuances.

Climate change is impacting and will disproportionately impact vulnerable communities that have contributed little to the emission of greenhouse gasses driving climatic change.

Anthropogenic climate change is also a multidimensional phenomenon created by global causes (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions through the burning of fossil fuels, livestock farming, or deforestation), but that is manifested locally in very different ways. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) indicates the difference between extreme weather events (e.g., floods, heatwaves, and wildfires) and slow-onset weather events (such as desertification, rising sea levels, or seasonal droughts). Climate change may cause severe displacement through extreme weather events. Some recent examples are the effects of cyclones Idai and Kenneth, which displaced hundreds of thousands of people in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi in 2019, or the Super Typhoon Goni, which in 2020 displaced thousands of people in the Philippines. Although these extreme climate processes receive more immediate media attention (and are followed by the arrival of international aid), less visible is the fact that many households and individuals move in response to slow-onset weather events.

There has been extensive research documenting climate-related mobilities worldwide, especially from rural areas in the Global South where climate-induced shocks severely affect rural households whose livelihoods depend on agriculture. To give a few examples, a 2012 study by Raphael Nawrotzki, Fernando Riosmena and Lori Hunter shows a link between decreasing precipitation rates in dry Mexican states and an increasing flow of Mexican migrants to the US from those areas. In Tanzania, a 2016 study by Zaneta Kubik and Mathilde Maurel found that a reduction in agricultural income caused by weather shocks increases the probability of internal migration the following year. A 2017 study of Malawi by Solomon Asfaw and Giuseppe Maggio shows that temperature shocks negatively affect household welfare in terms of food consumption. This research highlights the importance of reducing the climate vulnerability of agricultural households.

Slow and rapid weather processes conflate with other social or economic crises that need targeted actions and policies. It is difficult, almost impossible, to distinguish climate from other drivers of migration that overlap in many ways. For example, a 2017 study conducted by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification found that a sample of migrants living in Moroccan cities considered employment opportunities the major motivation to migrate. However, 30 percent of them mentioned that environmental changes such as drought and floods had also impacted their decision to migrate. Separating environmental causes from other socioeconomic or humanitarian reasons is especially challenging when climate-induced migration is not caused by specific extreme weather events but instead by slower processes such as land degradation or rainfall variation.

A lack of consideration of the multidimensional implications of climate-related migration might also divert focus from the importance of investing in preventive measures and durable solutions that could help ensure that people will not be forced to leave their homes because of climate change. This is particularly important for rural households that face the risk of food insecurity caused by climate variability and migrate to mitigate this risk. Indeed, researchers who find a link between changes in climate and international migration in developing countries suggest that policies designed to address these issues should focus on the sending regions, rather than the receiving ones, particularly increasing the resilience of those whose livelihoods depend on natural resources.

Another issue that most climate-related migrants face is exposure to loss and damage. This includes the loss of material possessions such as homes or land. But loss also affects cultural practices and ways of living that are attached to the land. For example, the communities of Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana—which have been exposed to flooding and sea-level rise for decades—are among the few that have received some

limited governmental financial support to engage in planned relocation. However, residents of this majority-Native American community have also raised concerns regarding losing ancestral and cultural ties to the land. These kinds of non-material losses are often neglected when climate-related migration is understood narrowly and without nuance.

Although headlines about so-called "climate refugees" may raise awareness of the plight of those affected by a changing climate, they may also stoke fear and rejection of a perceived potential "invasion" in countries in the Global North. It would likely be more helpful to avoid sensationalist framings and provide more accurate information concerning how climate change affects communities worldwide. This would enable fact-based discussion of the ways in which extreme and slow onset weather events are putting livelihoods at risk and what can be done to not only stop future climate change but also to adapt to its past and present impacts.

Markus Spiske, Pexels

Graffitti on a lamp post welcoming refugees.

towards fair and just climate migration-related policies

Many researchers prefer to talk about migration in response to climate change as an adaptation strategy that individuals and households adopt to diversify their livelihoods and cope with environmental challenges. This aligns with a justice approach to climate change (also known as "climate justice"), which reveals the uneven relationship between the causes and consequences of climate change. Indeed, climate change is impacting and will disproportionately impact vulnerable communities that have contributed little to the emission of greenhouse gasses driving climatic change. Migration is a way to cope with these disproportionate impacts. Furthermore, discourses that dismiss the human causes of climate change tend to have roots in wealthier and privileged populations. In this way, researchers have pointed to the connections between big oil corporations and campaigns that actively seek to block climate change mitigation and adaptation policies. Activists and experts have long advocated for policies that address the injustices around climate change. Following their lead, some organizations have tried to put these concerns into the international policy agenda.

The UNFCCC recognized the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities," stating that developed countries should take the lead in addressing and combating the climate change that they have inordinately contributed to creating. However, smaller and lower-income states have little political weight in the international policy arena. Thus, calls for justice are usually not reflected in the design and adoption of international agreements that often represent the interest of bigger and wealthier communities. For example, historically funding to address climate change has favored mitigation projects (those that tackle the causes of climate change, such as emissions reduction) instead of adaptation projects (those that help prepare for the impacts of climate change). However, adaptation to the effects of climate change should be at the top of global agendas if the nexus between migration and climate is to be addressed. One step in that direction is to drop narrow perspectives on climate-related migration in favor of a broader approach that captures the variety of experiences of those who face the impacts of climate change.

All of us—particularly policymakers—should make a conscious effort to contextualize the issue of climate migration and understand its complexities to develop fair and just policies. This would benefit those who are more affected by the consequences of climate change, regardless of whether they cross international borders or not.

recommended readings

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