HANDBOOK OF Critical Environmental Politics

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26. Environment-related human mobility

Eleonora Guadagno

UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIPLE FACETS OF THE TOPIC

The idea that global warming and its negative consequences will lead to migration fluxes from the Global South to Northern countries seems to be a common refrain recited by political leaders, international organizations, media and scientists. Nonetheless, if there is strong evidence concerning the environmental and social impacts of climate change, its consequences in respect of massive migration from 'poor' to 'rich' countries, remain very controversial: and even if could be sound tautologically, the difficulties in identifying this phenomenon cast doubts on the basis of the phenomenon itself (Baldwin and Bettini 2017, among others).

The vagueness of the concepts used in defining the scope and nature of climate-related mobility, the lack of legally adopted definitions and the differences in the methodologies used to produce statistics and scenarios, create an enormous debate, not only within public opinion, but also in academia. Furthermore, this vagueness, compounded by statistical biases (the available data are insufficient or only cover specific geographical areas or environmental drivers), undermines the possibility of using reliable and comparable datasets to produce scientific analyses over different temporal and spatial scales (Zetter 2007).

All this constitutes a key problem in the recognition/misrecognition of the phenomenon of mobility related to climate/environment,[1] and brings about significant research, policy and operational challenges to distinctly define different categories of mobile people – which has, in turn, implications on potential legal protection and assistance regimes that could be applicable to the different groups in an increasingly security-obsessed world. Even the 2018 United Nations (UN) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted by 164 countries, identifies climate change as a driver of migration and promotes international cooperation in order to implement governance measures addressed to people who are moving because of natural hazards and climate change.

While data are still lacking, gloomy projections about the global scale of climate-related mass migration tend to be misleading as they are often based on little evidence and only rarely take into account the role of adaptation in exposed communities.

The more pressing questions, even if they could appear rhetorical, to clarify the issue seem to be:

- How many people are involved in 'climate/environment-related human mobility'?
- Which categories of people?
- When will they move?
- Where will they go?

It could also be interesting to understand how the issue of 'climate/environment-related human mobility' is constructed and who is responsible for its definition. These questions help shed light on the complexity of this phenomenon which, owing to its ties with environmental,

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economic and legal structures of power and governance, is deeply political and needs to be investigated through an interdisciplinary and multi-scalar approach.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT

Since its first conceptualization, and despite the vagueness of terminology and the limited evidence base to describe the phenomenon, climate-related human mobility increasingly become a focus of public opinion between the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium (Nicholson 2001). Its popularity, owing to a proliferation in reports, television debates and documentaries, has contributed to sensitizing the public over the human impacts of climate change, but has also rested on a misinterpretation of reality, based on ambiguous predictions about the size of populations of concern (called on a case-by-case basis, according to the different sources, refugees, migrants or displaced), the entity of the flows and the scale of their impacts. It seems that the phenomenon is often addressed in an alarmist way in consideration of current estimation and projection, based on inaccurate information (or just on different methodologies), reinforcing widespread prejudices and generalizations.

By way of example, according to Myers's first estimates, the total number of environmental refugees was 25 million in 1995 and

> their numbers seem likely to grow still more rapidly if predictions of global warming are borne out, whereupon sea-level rise and flooding of many coastal communities, plus agricultural dislocations through droughts and disruption of monsoon and other rainfall systems, could eventually cause as many as 200 million people to be put at risk of displacement. (Myers 1997, pp. 167–8)

The 2001 World Disaster Report (Red Cross and Red Crescent Society 2001) estimated a 25 million environmental refugees by the end of 2010. In 2000, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that approximately 24 million people around the world were displaced owing to floods, famines and other environmental factors (UNHCR 2000). Christian Aid (2007, p. 5) estimated that 1 billion people would be forcibly displaced by 2050: '250 million could be permanently displaced by climate change-related phenomena such as droughts, floods and hurricanes, and 645 million by dams and other development projects, based on a current rate of 15 million people a year'. In 2009, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre of the Refugee Council (2009, p. 15) indicated that 'millions are already being displaced by climate-related natural disasters each year'. More recently, the Groundswell report (World Bank 2018), focused on the nexus between mobility and slow-onset climate change impacts in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America, highlighted that these three regions alone could potentially see 140 million of additional internal migrants owing to climate change by 2050. In the same year, Watts et al. (2018) report that in 2100 1 billion (plus or minus 50 per cent) people will migrate as a consequence of climate change.

Human mobility caused by environmental and climatic changes is not a new topic: in 1882, Ratzel, in his theory of migration, showed how movements of populations could be generated by changes in climate and temperature, or by environmental degradation. The environmental, climate or ecological drivers of human mobility have been a leitmotif in the migration theories for the first half of the 1900s (for an example, see Semple 1911). Vogt, in 1948, used the phrase 'ecological refuge' to describe places for people escaping from disasters.

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From the second half of the twentieth century, the relationship between environment and migration started to be rejected (Petersen 1958). Deterministic theories began to be abandoned as they were considered scientifically outdated, as noted by Ambrosini (2005). In addition, 'refugee studies' emerged in the political context of the Cold War (among others, Chandler, 1959), which led to a shift in the consideration of forced mobility, increasingly regarded as the consequence of state actions than of disasters and environmental degradation. Lastly, the economic paradigm emerged in the field of migration research (Borjas 1989) and research on mobility and migration started progressively to deny the relevance of natural factors, considering them to be a primitive element characterizing only specific communities (Piguet et al. 2011; Piguet 2013).

This idea fits within the modern conceptualization of 'progress', and with its complete alienation of human action from climate and nature in general (as noted by Latour 1999, 2011). According to this perspective, mostly developed in the Global North, vulnerability to environmental and climatic factors is the exclusive prerogative of less complex societies (Bankoff 2001; Mouhot 2012).

It is only since the late 1970s that the nexus between environmental processes and events and mobility has been rediscovered, mainly owing to the emergence of issues linked to global changes in climate, resource availability, and integrity of ecosystems and delivery of their services, and owing to the increased risks related to technological hazards or severe pollution.

In 1976, environmental analysts Brown et al., in a Worldwatch Institute paper, used the term 'environmental refugees' for the first time, to refer to migrants who were forced to flee their homes owing to a changing environment, as a consequence of pollution, climate change, overgrazing, overcrowding, urbanization and deforestation, political instability, conflict over energy, water and minerals and biodiversity reduction. However, the term 'environmental refugee' came into popular use following El-Hinnawi's work on the topic for the United Nations Environment Programme, which defined them as 'those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life' (El-Hinnawi 1985, p. 4). Subsequently, Jacobson (1988, pp. 37–8) identified different types of 'environmental refugees':

> Those displaced temporarily due to local disruption such as an avalanche or earthquake; those who migrate because environmental degradation has undermined their livelihood or poses unacceptable risks to health; and those who resettle because land degradation has resulted in desertification or because of other permanent and untenable changes in their habitat.

These initial works are characterized by broad definitions, a marked concern for environmental degradation, the consideration of all the natural and human-made hazards as possible drivers of mobility, and a prevalent focus on the Global South. In the following decades, a number of articles appeared to confirm or criticize the contributions of the early scholars (such as El-Hinnawi and Jacobson). Mathews (1989, pp. 162–77) uses El-Hinnawi's 'environmental refugees' definition to reconsider the concept of security, while Westing (1992), writing about categories of refugees, noted that the more environmental refugees flee from disasters, the more their movement will have global implications on national and international security, providing a first critical analysis over the subject which deals with international climate governance.

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In 1993, the UNHCR's *State of the World's Refugees* identified four root causes of refugee flows, namely, political instability, economic tensions, ethnic conflict and environmental degradation. Myers (1994, pp. 6–7) defines environmental refugees as 'People who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation and other environmental problems'. A year later, the Climate Institute in Washington, DC, published 'Environmental exodus: an emergent crisis in the global arena', a report that legitimized the use of the concept of environmental and climate refugees (Kent and Myers 1995). Some criticism was provided by other academics who considered the term 'environmental refugee' to be simplistic, one-sided and misleading (among others, Kibreab 1997) because it does not include people not moving to other countries. For the first time, the problem of security is associated with specific geographical areas (especially the arid parts of Africa), and the phenomenon of displacement in the aftermath of catastrophic events starts to be considered as a political concern in the international security future scenarios – associated with other conflicts and warfare in Global South countries – which needs to be addressed through concrete response by the international community. Generally, in analysing the literature production, the 1990s seem to be characterized by a sentiment of insecurity which starts to consider the 'environmental issues' as a broader challenge and is reflected in political agendas, often orientated to securitization of borders and tightening of immigration policies (Ambrosini 2005). The environment is seen as a tangible triggering factor of broader conflicts between and within countries, especially in Global South contexts; indeed, the management measures put in place are becoming progressively more selective and repressive towards the most vulnerable populations/cohorts, such as irregular migrants, asylum seekers and temporary workers.

Since the early 2000s, scholars started to talk instead of 'environmental migrants' or 'environmentally displaced persons'. The necessity to use different definitions arose because the term 'environmental refugee' previously used in the literature did not fit into the international definition of 'refugee' provided by the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, in particular as regards the concept of a well-founded fear of persecution (Renaud et al. 2007, p. 14). 'The current parameters of the international legal definition of refugee make it inappropriate to use the term of environmental refugee in a general context. Uncritical use of the term may quickly result in confusion' (Renaud et al. 2007, p. 14).

Throughout the 2000s, these definitions have become increasingly prevalent among scholars and international organizations, reflecting the incapacity to recognize a specific category of 'environmental refugees' and the consequent impossibility of assigning them a specific status in order to guarantee their international protection, even if both in the Global South and the Global North phenomena of mobility and resettlement and the internal and international displacement in the aftermath of environmental degradation and catastrophes were very common.

Following Myers (1994), the idea that specific effects of climate change, and not only of environmental degradation in general, cause massive displacements has been evoked by several other academics,[2] but the label 'climate refugee' has been widely adopted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ollitrault 2010) and in the international policy discourse. Bates (2002) suggests a categorization of environmental refugees based on criteria related to the kind of environmental disruption triggering the movement (disasters, expropriations and deteriorations), its duration (acute or gradual) and whether migration was a planned outcome or not.

On occasions, the use of 'climate refugees' has also represented a way to improve visibility of reports in the media and in public opinion. Along these lines the Council of Europe reports

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that 'The impacts of climate change on the environment and human mobility are becoming increasingly worrying: the number of natural disasters has doubled over the past two decades' (McAdam 2010, p. 207).

In the absence of an internationally agreed definition, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) developed a working definition in 2008 that refuses the label of refugees preferring the term 'environmental migrants' as more inclusive:

> Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling 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. (Warner and Laczko 2008, p. 2)

In 2011, a group of scholars of the Government Office for Science in the UK, considering mobility and migration as a consequence of environmental change, cast doubts on the mono-causality of the given definitions (not considering the cultural, social, individual, household and capital factors impinging on mobility): 'Environmental change will affect migration now and in the future, specifically through its influence on a range of economic, social and political drivers which themselves affect migration' (Foresight Project 2011, p. 9).

Over the past decade or so, the debate has been expanded to discuss the role of mobility in the context of environmental and climate change, with some studies considering migration as a failure in adapting to climate change and others seeing it as an adaptation measure (Black et al. 2011; Stojanov 2014) in considering that in the context of climate change the 'immobility' (owing to personal or exogenous reasons) can also be considered as a failure in climate change adaptation (Kelman et al. 2015). The range and complexity of the interactions between these drivers means that it will rarely be possible to distinguish individuals for whom environmental factors are the sole driver ('environmental migrants'). Moreover, these studies introduced the concept of 'trapped population' into the debate, highlighting how high levels of vulnerability to environmental change and low degrees of human, social and economic capital could negatively affect the capability to move and the possibility to be identified during the recovery (Foresight 2011, pp. 9, 14). However, in the policy and academic debate it is not uncommon to find the expression 'mobility in the context of environmental change'.

As highlighted in this diachronic analysis, decades of academic and policy debate have allowed identify key conceptual issues to circumscribe the topic:

- the possibility of considering mobility/migration (including all categories associated with human movement, for example, displacement and planned relocation) as outcomes of events/processes that are owing to, or affected by, environmental/climate change (both sudden-onset, such as floods, or slow-onset, such as desertification);
- the misrecognition of cultural and social elements which mediate (for both mitigation or accentuation) the nexus between environmental/climate change impacts and mobility;
- both 'forced immobility' and 'forced mobility' as outcomes of vulnerability owing to these social elements;
- the possibility/impossibility of encasing the phenomenon in consolidated legal frameworks both at domestic and international levels;
- the necessity/uselessness of specific or new legal or judicial practices, at different scales, to grant protection to this specific 'new' category of mobile people;

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- the reasons of the spectacularization/minimization of the issue and the differences in approaches of analysis, solutions and policies produced by different actors (for example, international organizations, academia and NGOs).

PUTTING THE DEBATE IN PERSPECTIVE

The complexity of the link between climate and environmental change and migration and the political and strategic consequences of its different interpretations often hinder a distinct definition and quantification of the phenomenon (Guadagno 2016, 2017). On the one hand, it is possible to observe a growing attention to the nexus between environmental degradation and mobility by media, NGOs and governments in the public discourse as well as in the international political agenda. On the other, a lack of evidence in the analysis of the phenomenon and the concentration of case studies in the Global South have created, since the 1970s, an articulate debate around the definition, the quantification and the explanation of the phenomenon among scholars (Adamo 2008). Laczko and Aghazarm (2009) identified the 3 Ds problem: definition, data and drivers. The authors believe that the challenges in the recognition and protection of this particular category of people moving in the context of environmental change are strictly linked with the difficulty that academics and governments have to limit and circumscribe the phenomenon.

Some scholars consider climate migrants as proper 'refugees', needing protection under international law (see, among others, Cournil and Mazzega 2007). Others claim that climate migrants cannot be considered to be 'traditional' refugees or stateless people, and need a 'new' form of protection (McAdam 2010). In this regard, for example, the legal scholars of the University of Limoges (France) have imagined a new convention (the Appel de Limoges sur les réfugiés écologiques (et environnementaux) 2006) conceived as a tool for the recognition of these categories currently unprotected. There are, however, some examples and practices of how protection has been granted to this group of people, at international level and at domestic scale.[3] The 16 February 2018 L'Aquila (Italy) court decision, for instance, granted a Bengali citizen humanitarian protection in the second instance for 'environmental reasons' (Ciervo 2018). In the ordinance, the reference to poverty is explicit as a socio-economic consequence of climate change, environmental conflicts, deforestation and land grabbing, laying, in a certain way, the foundations for a reconceptualization of the very idea of 'economic/traditional migrant'.

The problem, however, is that legal categories, which could multiply, are often inapplicable owing to their stringent definitions, and could even become counter-productive in consideration of the possibility to protect all the different mentioned categories.

These differences in relation to definitions, drivers, numerical predictions and consequences in the short, medium and long terms call for a deeper reflection on the phenomenon that takes into account all the relevant political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of the issue of climate-related mobility in order to understand the reasons behind the different approaches and perspectives on the topic.

Concepts often used as synonyms (such as 'climate refugees', 'climate migrants', 'environmental refugees', 'environmental migrants' and 'environmental displaced persons', or other mediatic definitions, such as 'tsunami refugees', 'famine refugees' or 'nuclear refugees') and referred to phenomena broadly linked with human mobility owing to environmental degrada-

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tion or climate change, create a misleading representation of a phenomenon. As previously highlighted, environmental factors are very difficult to isolate as the sole drivers of movements (Gentle et al. 2018; Guadagno and Guadagno 2021). This much was clear already to Myers (1994, p. 7): 'It is often difficult, however, to differentiate between refugees driven by environmental factors and those impelled by economic problems'. The analysis of the environmental link often follows a very simplified, deterministic path – where the environment becomes the most important push factor – denying a complex, multi-causal and multivariate process that is always mediated by social, cultural, political and economic factors. Moreover, these simplistic conceptualizations may fail to account for environmental change that may result in a well-planned migration decision or in the sudden abandonment of an area – or anything in between.

On a closer look, though, these predictions seem artificially inflated and based more on speculation than on scientific evidence.

The impossibility of accurate estimates and predictions has been noted by Döös (1997). He considers that a large number of factors contributing to the possibility of environmental migration have very low or no predictability. This is why the vast majority of previous studies concerning the magnitude of the phenomenon are based on post-disaster recovery enumerations (see, for example, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reports, which annually estimates the number of people displaced by sudden-onset climate-related disasters).

'Rather, the linkage appears simply as "common sense" – if water levels rise, or forests disappear, it seems obvious that people will have to move' (Castles 2002, p. 4), overlooking the additional layers of complexity involved in mobility decision-making. Instead, the migration (or the flight) of an individual is a reflection of individual and household-level livelihood strategies, levels of income and assets, household size and composition (disasters and environmental impacts in general have distinct age, race/ethnicity and gendered effects; see Chapter 16 in this volume), ownership of land and goods, prior migration experience and migration networks (Hugo 1981), individual/familiar perceived relative deprivation (in material and immaterial goods) (Findley 1987; Hunter and David 2011; Le Billon 2001), expectations and confidence towards the institutions, media and scientific forecasts (when possible), local/regional/international power structure (Massey et al. 2007). In addition, subjective considerations involved in the decision to migrate abroad or internally (Suhrke and Visentin 1991) take place in the context of societies or communities with varying capacities to adapt to climate change.

REFRAMING THE PHENOMENON FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In addition to the problems of definition, quantification, limitation of the discourse to specific areas of the globe, recognition of specific categories and recognition of their protection claims, the mainstream discourse on climate-induced mobility may also hide a neo-liberal agenda. As highlighted by Felli and Castree (2012, p. 4), the question is 'whether our efforts should be directed toward adapting as individual migrants to increasingly unadapted socioecological conditions, or whether we support the possibility of changing these very conditions. Adapting to "global environmental change" or changing the very nature of the global environmental order? Now that is a political question'. Rethinking the conceptualization of environmentally induced mobility does not only involve reframing its theoretical approach. It involves a para-

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digm shift to give the correct value to the words and to the category of people they define, on the whole, in media and in dissemination contexts. This link is instead shaped by a multitude of community and society-wide factors, but also by a level of personal choice/agency/capability and previous economic/social/human capital (Bates 2002; Black, 1998; Boano 2008; Gemenne 2011 Piguet et al. 2011).

Moreover, it is necessary to reconsider the global implications of the phenomenon: the difficulties in providing an inclusive definition and in calculating the real dimension of this category are the main reasons behind the insufficient international and domestic protection regimes. This, in turn, creates an institutional and regulatory vacuum (Kolmannskog and Trebbi 2010; Nespor 2007) – in opposition to environmental justice principles (Felli 2008; Grasso 2010; Chapter 13 in this volume) – and generates little more than fear in Northern countries which define this issue in relations to migration, humanitarian, development, security and environmental 'problems': 'The underdeveloped South poses a physical threat to the prosperous North by population explosions, resource scarcity, violent conflict and mass migration' (Dalby 2002, p. 71).

The reconceptualization of the phenomenon also implies abandonment of the idea that climate mobility only concerns the Global South as the area of origin and the Global North as the 'natural' area of destination. Moreover, this perspective does not consider that climate-related mobility will occur not just from, but within, the Global South. When considering the traditional patterns of migration, in both scientific and public policy discourse it is often forgotten that the biggest rate of migration occurs internally or within the same geographical region (IOM 2020).[4] This approach is based on the idea of the invulnerability of the Global North and its complete detachment from the natural environment, contrary to the Global South which is more susceptible to generating a primitive form of mobility (Baldwin 2013). However, this approach does not take into account that, being a global phenomenon, climate change will affect all the globe. However, while disasters and long-term degradation phenomena will also hit the Global North, the level of vulnerability are not uniformly distributed among the communities in all geographical contexts. This tendency has been analysed in the attempt to understand how post-colonial and the neo-imperialist paradigm (Dalby 2004) still link scientific research with interpretations of the reality by the media and governmental policies. The analysis of the different frameworks and conceptualizations starts by Bankoff's (2001) in his discussion of 'vulnerability' as a post-colonial, 'Western' discourse.

The increasing attention paid to environmentally induced displacement in some specific areas in these alarmist ways is not strictly a 'humanitarian' preoccupation, but may derive from strategic and political concerns related to immigration in Northern countries.[5] Western security agencies seem to prompt region-specific studies in order to predict future immigration flows and be able to justify restrictive immigration policies. The emphasis on data and scenarios is instrumental to a political system where the 'securitisation' of environmental degradation is bringing military considerations to the issue, promoting repressive tendencies; moreover, the accentuation of the relationship between forced mobility and climate change, becomes an alibi in order to avoid recognizing an objective common (but differentiated) responsibility in environmental degradation and unfair resource distribution at local and global level.

In conclusion, beyond the specific issues in defining the phenomenon, the main paradigm shift must be, on the one hand, in recognizing the economic and power structures that generate conditions of vulnerability in local settings at a global level (both in Northern and Southern countries) and, on the other, in readdressing the tools and frameworks for the management of

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migrant flows which are currently mainly characterized as security and restrictive migration regimes and border policies.

NOTES

1. In order to study the debate surrounding the politicization of the climate change and mobility nexus, principally consider the works of Mol (1999), Bankoff (2001), Miller (2004), Gemenne (2009) and Zetter (1991, 2007).
2. Ferris (2011, p. 2) defines 'climate refugees' as those who are subject to 'displacement which is likely to occur as a result of climate change: the relocation or resettlement of communities from areas which are no longer habitable because of environmental consequences of climate change'.
3. For example, 'The Nansen Initiative is a state-led, bottom-up consultative process intended to build consensus on the development of a protection agenda addressing the needs of people displaced across international borders in the context of disasters and the effects of climate change' (https://www.nanseninitiative.org/, accessed 31 January 2020).
4. Moreover, in consideration of the African context and the data provided by UNDESA (2019), IOM (2020) and European Commission (2018), if the total number of African extra-continental migrants was 26.5 million in 2019 (2 per cent of the African population), over 21 million live in neighborhood African countries and 19 million live in different regions within the continent.
5. This is a manifestation of Bricmont's (2006) 'humanitarian imperialism', which demonstrates how the human rights framework and the other Global North concepts created by political leaders and the intellectual community have been abused to further an imperialistic agenda. This prejudice reveals a presumed superiority of the Global North countries and underlines the dialectic of the recognition/misrecognition in the alterity: the Global North defines a phenomenon for the Global South, and helps the Global South to face it.

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