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Climate migration myths

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Abstract

Misleading claims about mass migration induced by climate change continue to surface in both academia and policy. This requires a new research agenda on ‘climate mobilities’ that moves beyond simplistic assumptions and more accurately advances knowledge of the nexus between human mobility and climate change.

Main

International migration and climate policy assume that anthropogenic climate change already is, and will increasingly be, a major driver of mass migration from the Global South to the Global North. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change explicitly specifies the need to avert,

minimize and address climate displacement,¹ while the United Nations Security Council warns of mass climate migration with the risk of aggravating conflicts.² While the potential for climate change to disrupt livelihoods and threaten lives is real, these policies reinforce a false narrative that predicts large numbers of ‘climate refugees’. This self-referencing narrative within scientific literature and policy reports has the consequence of entrenching climate migration as a looming security crisis without an empirical scientific basis.³

Rather than being challenged, this securitization narrative, presenting climate change and migration as a security risk, is actively being perpetuated by public funding schemes for scientific research intended to inform national, regional or international policy development. In doing so these funding policies, as a matter of priority, justify keeping climate migrants in places of origin, so as to present no harm to populations in destination areas.⁴ Symptomatic of this securitization agenda was a recent EU Horizon 2020 funding call for research on climate change and migration that reflected political demands rather than research gaps to alleviate “migration pressures at the source”.⁵ Similarly, a Horizon 2020 research funding call from 2015 used the example of climate migration to illustrate the “real threat” to European security of Third Country climate-driven crises.⁶

The influence of this narrative is considerable, with ‘climate-induced migration’ now a common rationale for measures to strengthen and protect national and regional borders in the Global North. For example, the EU migration agenda aims to protect borders “with the intent to keep people in their places and minimize migration”.⁷ The US Department of Defence names intra- and inter-state migration associated with climate change as responsible for negative human security effects in destination countries.⁸ Similarly, Australia is pursuing a policy of territorial control, by either keeping borders closed or extending Australian law to ‘off shore’ processing on Pacific island countries.⁹

New international science funding schemes, such as the forthcoming call on Human Migration and Global Change by the internationally funded Belmont Forum and successor programmes to EU Horizon 2020, can help in rethinking climate change and migration, by offering scientists an opportunity to take a new look at what constitutes global mobility. If such opportunities are not taken, there is a

danger that migration policy will continue to be based on weak scientific evidence that reinforces the self-perpetuating myth of climate change migration as a looming security crisis.

A fresh approach is therefore needed, one that enables science to actively help shape public funding schemes for scientific research that well captures the complex, mobile and interconnected nature and key challenges of climate change and migration. To achieve that aim, we offer the following research agenda consisting of six priorities to help science policy to move beyond its securitized outlook.

Six research priorities

First, research and research funding must enable questioning of the assumption that climate change causes mass human migration, rather than simply reinforcing it. There is already significant evidence that migration is not solely driven by climate change. It is instead influenced by a mix of climatic, socio-economic, cultural, and political factors.¹⁰ Even when climate change has a role to play, it remains difficult to determine the extent of its influence. For instance, when people have to move in the event of a cyclone, it is not always clear to what extent the cyclone can be attributed to climate change.¹¹ Moreover, a lack of measures, such as early warning systems, building codes and cyclone shelters, also play a role in shaping mobility. This means that categorizing ‘climate migrants’ as distinguishable from ‘non-climate migrants’ is not empirically possible in most if not all circumstances. As a consequence, predictions of mass climate-induced migration are inherently flawed.¹²

Second, the term migration does not capture the diverse ways in which people do or do not become mobile in response to a changing climate and should therefore be avoided. Some people may temporarily (even seasonally) move, while others may permanently relocate to nearby urban centers.^{11,13} Regardless, mobility commonly involves relatively short distances, meaning that people typically move within their country or region.¹¹ Moreover, many may also face the problem of not being able to move to safety, while others do not want to move even if facing significant risk to their own wellbeing.¹¹ To capture this diversity, research should shift its attention from ‘climate migration’ to ‘climate mobilities’. Such a program would capture the multiple forms, directions and multiplicities of human movement in

the context of climate change as well as the transformative character of mobility and its impact on places of origin, transit and destination.^{13,14} It would also focus on the movement of people in more neutral and therefore analytical terms - neither making assumptions that mobility is unidirectional or monocausal, nor inherently positive or negative.

Third, new research supported by scientific funding programs, should examine and address ‘climate mobilities’ as the new normal rather than the exception. Movement and migration are inherent to the highly interconnected world we live in and a standard element of social life.¹⁵ As such, mobility will necessarily be part of the range of responses available to those affected by climate change.¹¹ Instead of asking whether climate change causes human mobility, research should focus on whether and if so how climate change will alter existing interconnections and human mobility patterns under different scenarios of global warming and mitigation and adaptation policies, and how these are in turn shaped by existing mobilities.

Fourth, it is crucial to fund and engage in research that goes beyond attempts to quantify and model new mobility resulting from climate change. Current climate migration models typically reinforce linear ‘crisis’ or ‘mass’-migration assumptions.¹⁶ The news media and policy alike tend to interpret the results of these models incorrectly. For example, they often refer to the maximum figures of a range as ‘predictions’, which in turn may be used to support the politics of border securitization. Policy instead should rely on research that better accounts for the non-linear complexity of mobility in the context of climate and social change in its evidence base.¹³

Fifth, research needs to better include affected populations in ‘climate mobilities’ research. Multiple knowledge systems, such as local and indigenous knowledges, exist both among mobile populations and in destination areas, and should be included in building a stronger evidence-base. The solutions to the challenges posed by climate change – whether they imply increased mobility or not¹⁷ – should be developed and formulated with a strong involvement of affected populations. With better funding opportunities, indigenous organisations representing populations involved in mobility associated with climate change can lead indigenous research, or participate in co-developed research.

This is important if the complexity of ‘climate mobilities’ is to be captured, particularly its interconnectedness with related policy areas, such as indigenous rights and human development.

Finally, research on ‘climate mobilities’ needs to shift part of its focus from climate sensitive sending areas to destination areas. Whether or not such mobility becomes a political or humanitarian problem depends on the policy choices by home, host and transit states and involved organisations, not on the mobility itself. As discussed in the introduction, global migration policy is defined by the strict border policies of popular migration receiving areas. These border policies in turn are shaped by an increasing fear of migrants among many citizens, such as in several European countries, USA, Brazil, Australia and elsewhere.¹⁸ In order to expand beyond the securitisation of climate-related mobility, research with support of funding agencies also needs to focus on how to overcome the profound fear of the other. This requires new and further collaborations across social science research into belonging, the acceptance of difference and identity, and important political, cultural and historical attributes of destination areas.

Keeping the questions open

Border securitization in current global, regional and national politics has infiltrated science policy. It is biasing public discourse and scientific and policy debates, despite the paucity of supporting evidence.¹⁹

To move beyond the securitization of climate-related migration, a new research agenda is needed. Our six priorities offer a substantially different agenda on ‘climate mobilities’ that prioritizes exploration rather than minimization of the complexity of the nexus between human mobility and climate change.

A new research agenda requires funding agencies to change their focus away from a securitized outlook, allowing for a more nuanced science policy on ‘climate mobilities’ to emerge. A first step in this direction can be achieved, for example, through Human Migration and Global Change under the Belmont Forum fund, coordinated by Future Earth, which actively relies on academic feedback to help shape its funding priorities. The six ‘climate mobilities’ priorities also speak to Horizon 2020 successor

programs, such as possible EU ‘Mission-oriented Research and Innovation’ funding schemes, and other future, publicly funded programmes at the national level.

Instead of having policy dictate the priorities of science, resulting in self-perpetuating false claims about climate-induced migration, the science policy process needs to allow careful and critical evidence-seeking research to indicate the main challenges ahead. In doing so, a ‘climate mobilities’ research agenda can help ensure that policy addresses the right issues to start with.

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