Climate change and human movement - rethinking the 'security threat' narrative

Climate change certainly exacerbates migration—but we might need to reconsider how we talk about it

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Try to type "climate migration" in any browser or content platform, even Youtube. Most of the resources you will come across are probably issued by strategic analysis companies or security organisations. What was before a niche topic of interest for environmental organisations or scientists, has transferred to the public sphere rather successfully. Now it has been included in a much broader conversation about security, peace and conflict.
That is because the complexity and the stratification of the phenomenon make it impossible for it not to encroach on infinite aspects of human, planetary and ecological existence, peace and security included, migration in the first place of the list.

But why has the climate crisis recently become so entangled in the security discourse? What are the collateral effects of such narrative, and why could it be problematic? Could this instead be of any help to the fight for planetary justice and peace, one that could strive to solve environmental and social issues jointly, holistically?

Human movement throughout history has been a constant and an effective means of adapting to ever changing environmental and climate conditions. Nowadays, the extremisation of ecological disasters along with sociopolitical and economic crises has led to new waves of migration, especially from the MENA region to Europe and from South America to North America. Migration is but a new phenomenon; however, the increasing scaremongering of newspapers and public figures is contributing to framing the issue as a tragic and inevitable doom that is challenging the comfortable lives of those living in recipient countries from a socioeconomic point of view.

Moreover, a new line of thought has emerged in the past decade: climate change and migration are becoming increasingly intertwined in numerous scholarships and in the public discourse, as the IPCC report from 2014 proves. Multiple scientific studies have been carried out, that take the stance that climate change is a trigger for migration: in one paper, _Barrios et al. (2006)_ investigate the link between rain shortages and internal movement from rural to urban areas in Sub Saharan countries; the same area is subject of research by _Marchiori et al. (2011)_, who look into temperature patterns and rainfall anomalies.

Even though these and other studies on the matter[1] are not exempt from critiques[2], the claim that environmental disasters might be linked with human displacement seems logical: one study by the CMCC qualitatively evaluated how both extreme climatic events and slowly onset environmental changes lead to out-migration; the more rapid and sizeable this wave is, the harder it will be for the recipient country to absorb it, leading to situations of conflict or tension, especially if the institutions are weak and the country is already ethnically or politically divided.

The reason why other studies disagree that this thesis concretely and consistently stands up for examination is also to be found in the paper: in middle-income countries, an increase in storms, floods or other extreme climatic events push more people to migrate; this is not the case for very low-income countries, where such happenings can be so detrimental that they prevent people from migrating, by depleting their remaining resources or liquidity. The complexity of the matter and the way it is subject to a multitude of different variables that are very hard to include completely in one statistical model are some of the reasons why it is almost impossible to draw a single, clear line between climate change and migration.

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[1] Cai *et al.* (2016), Cattaneo and Peri (2016), Beine and Parsons (2015), Burke *et al.* (2009) - this one especially investigates the link between civil war in African countries and temperature increase

[2] Ciccone (2011), Couttenier and Soubeyran (2014), Buhang (2010)

After reading multiple papers by scholars rather opposed on the matter, three things only can be claimed with relative confidence.

First, climate-induced migration only makes sense if viewed within its context; socioeconomic and political circumstances play a huge role in determining whether a natural hazard will have a radical effect on displacement. Some of these circumstances are, as seen, the financial means of the household and of the community, the social network and the perception of risk (which also depends on the type of environmental shock) and also the ability of national and international institutions to provide relief to those who have been struck by the disaster. One key-word in this hindsight is vulnerability: environmental, social, economic exposure to risk (which does not only include the gravity of the natural hazard, but also the host of opportunities provided by the social network, financial viability and mostly by institutions) determines whether one will be forced or will decide to migrate, where to, and for how long, more than the environmental event.

Second, migration is indeed a climate adaptation strategy; as such, it must not be feared, but supported. However, there is a strong need for us to work at the root of the problem to find other, more sustainable, adaptation strategies. Adaptation and mitigation mechanisms that do not take into consideration root causes, institutional flaws, loopholes, postcolonial legacies and unjust socioeconomic conditions will lead to

partial, ineffective and rather bizarre policies.

Third, and the very core of this article, we must reconsider the way we talk about climate-induced migration and "climate refugees", as there are a series of problematic elements that lead to counterproductive policies and undesirable collateral effects. Angela Oels, a lecturer in International Relations at the University of Lund in Sweden , argues that the public and scientific discourse in recent years has shifted towards a "security threat" narrative when it comes to climate refugees. The dominant view is not that of a security threat to the migrants themselves, or a matter of ecological security, but rather a question of danger for national security of the Global North. The policy response to this is enhancing the military: defense becomes priorital in respect to climate mitigation.

A recent study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows how European countries spend way more in military defense than in humanitarian aid. For Germany, it's 46,9 billions against 21,1, for France 46,8 versus 10,7, for Italy 25,7 versus 2,25 billions[3]. This is not specific to the "climate security" issue, but it shows how defense and militarisation are becoming increasingly central in Western countries' political agendas; and it shows how the security narrative is rarely centered around the victims, but

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[3] You can find an infographic by ISPI, the Italian Institute for International Political Studies at this link

rather the ones we could arguably view as the main culpables of the dramatic situation the Planet is experiencing at the moment.

Another enlightening case study is provided by the author Betsy Hartmann, who in a paper for the Journal of International Development discusses how ever since 2003 the Pentagon intelligently sponsored the now widely accepted apocalyptic, Neo-Malthusian scenario in which, in perfect line with the worst tragedy of the commons,overbreeding populations from poor countries would fight over almost depleted resources and need to migrate en masse to Europe and North America. We could summarise this narrative as follows: *population pressure* is caused by overly high birth rates; it leads to a *degradation* of resources and to a consequent *scarcity*. However, if we look into this, we will find many faults in this line of reasoning.

Why is it that in richer countries a depletion of resources leads to technological innovation and creativity?
Why is it that many other countries that have massive abundance of resources (like oil, natural gases or minerals) still struggle with instability and mass poverty - and even war? Collier and Hoeffler (2002) provide case studies that show how abundance of resources can stir conflict (either by financing it directly, or by offering a higher payoff in case of victory).

Why do certain communities that are more than others struck by natural

catastrophes manage to find strategies to cope with scarcity?
Most of these answers remain unanswered by the dominant scholarship, and lead Hartmann and others to think that they are much more part of a specific narrative (with a specific scope) rather than a depiction of reality.

National security working groups and Think Tanks find the new challenge posed by climate-induced instability surprisingly similar to that posed by terrorism, and agreed that an efficient response would be met if environmental and defense groups worked in tandem. This is part of a larger phenomenon that sees development and humanitarian aid forces being largely deployed as means of military defense (or offense) and civilian fields such as that of environmental protection being taken over by military operations.

The main example Hartmann gives is that of the AFRICOM, or United States African Command, created in 2008 with the intentions, as Daniel Volman wrote in an internet article for Allafrica, to protect US access to oil, to promote the war on terror, to counter Chinese influence and pursue a policy of stability within the region (also in terms of climate security).
Hartmann sees in this reactionary policy framework one of the main perilous consequences of depicting the looming threat of climate conflict as a security danger for Western nation states.

It is, however, not the only collateral effect; she argues that it fosters a justification for western intervention

and the so-called "green colonialism". Moreover, that depoliticising the term "refugee", extending its status to climate refugees, too, despite seeming a good solution to the issue of human vulnerability in the context of environmental disasters, might actually shift the responsibility away from institutions and power dynamics and onto "natural causes", a sort of environmental determinism; from North to South; from culpables to victims. It sometimes ends up in counterproductive policies in recipient countries, that fragment the term refugee (whose lines and rules have now become more blurred, hence, more easily evaded), hierarchise the bureaucracy, politicise ethnicity and make it harder for certain groups or nationalities to be accepted as refugees.

Angela Oels also argues that this new "adaptation" or "resilience building" narrative, in spite of seeming moved by the best intentions (away from the xenophobic fear of migrants or the paternalistic "saving the migrants"), shifts attention away from mitigation policies. Defense is becoming more important; adaptation is, too.

The latest IPCC report has given a rather pessimistic, although very realistic, depiction of the future that awaits us, which is dramatic even in the best of cases. However, it has also made clear that the worst consequences of the climate crisis are still avoidable. It is clearly smart to think ahead and come up with adaptation strategies for the worst scenarios. But this should not equal ignoring mitigation and continuing on the line of "business as

usual". Mostly because the current adaptation strategies that we are giving shape to are not really effective; even though seeing migration as a solution, as an opportunity, rather than as a menace, is a huge step forward, it is also pivotal to understand that relocation might not always be a possibility. Not for people on small islands; not for very low-income households, as the first part of this article has highlighted.

It is also too optimistic to think that framing migration as a security threat might lead richer countries to attempt more effective resolutions of the climate and migration crises. It is much more likely (*historia docente*) that the population will turn to populist and reactionary parties and policies, who sponsor this scaremonger rhetoric.

All these considerations have some serious implications for the research about climate-induced conflict and migration that need to be addressed.

The purpose of this critical debate is not to underestimate the gravity of the social and human consequences of the climate crisis. Being so tiered and complex, it inevitably affects all life on Earth, and it has important effects on human practices and behaviours. At the core of the discussion is not the will to delete the link between climate change and migration, or between climate change and conflict, but rather to reframe it within a discourse that can really prove beneficial to those who are frontline casualties of the climate crisis.

Reframing this debate means multiple things: it means realising climate

change is a multiplier effect that amplifies existing crises and that depoliticising tragedies, taking the blame away from corrupt institutions, be it national or international ones, means covering up for them. It means hence viewing the role of climate change at its intersection with socioeconomic and political threats. It means finding political responsibles for the crisis and holding them accountable to take effective measures towards sustainability and justice. It means pushing for green peacebuilding solutions, that need to be bottom-up, grassroot, civilian and demilitarised. It means realising this is an ecological challenge, that begins on numerous levels and ends up in even more numerous ones: viewing different aspects jointly can be useful to a certain extent, however this must in no way prevent us from acknowledging the complexity of a situation that can't be solved with a "one-size-fits-all" solution.

Most of all, it means replacing the focus of the debate on what matters the most: human security (not national) and vulnerability.
Migration is an increasingly polarising subject: if a massive part of the literature now recognises it as a resource, as an adaptation method, a huge share of the public opinion is still stuck in an extremely racist mindset. This is mirrored by policy, that responds to the xenophobic environment as well as to the alarmist discourse that permeates the debate about climate migration.

If it is a positive step forward that migration is, at least officially, regarded as a solution to climate-induced hazards and disasters, it is necessary, now more than ever, to focus on prevention and mitigation as much as possible, to ensure that all our islands stay on the world map and even those who can't afford to migrate are guaranteed safety as much as possible.

Most of all, in terms of the debate about climate and security, it is central to add nuance to it and to unpack the multiple tiers of meanings that compound it. When climate change is linked to security, whose security are we exactly talking about? And who do the consequent policies benefit? Who are the green technologies (carbon offsetting, resource management, reforestation, water purification systems) helping and empowering most?

If the answer to these questions is "western nation states", we might be perpetrating colonial and unjust practices that won't change the power dynamics or the institutions in favour of populations in the global south. A quick internet search, if you have tried it, is sadly confirming that the discourse is centered around national security and military control.

If and when the answer becomes "displaced persons", and the attention shifts towards human and ecological security, mitigation before adaptation, demilitarised and empowering development aid…then - and only then - will we be able to say that we are on the right track.

Resources

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