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# 37. The paradoxes of climate change and migration

*by*
Andrew Baldwin and François Gemenne

*Human migration is often seen as one of the most serious consequences of climate change. Indeed, it can be seen as a security or humanitarian issue. But might it also be a positive adaptation response to climate change?*

Until recently, social scientists have largely overlooked the migration effects of climate change. But given its growing policy significance, more social scientists are now taking an interest. Research on the topic is primarily empirical and normative, but social scientists are beginning to examine the broader implications that climate change-induced migration may have for political, cultural and social life. Current research is therefore moving in new and innovative directions. Nevertheless, more research is needed to appreciate how this migration overlaps with issues of governance, development, security and risk management, and wider issues regarding identity, gender and equity.

Earlier empirical research in this field often tried to predict the number of migrants who might be displaced by environmental or climate change. Today, researchers seem less persuaded by the predictive reasoning approach (Gemenne, 2011a), and are more inclined to use scenario forecasting to understand this phenomenon. A recent study on migration and global environmental change undertaken by Foresight (2011) makes effective use of scenarios to assist in policy development. Previous research also tended to imply a strong causal relationship between environmental factors and human mobility (Myers, 2002), an approach which has since been largely discredited.

Most researchers now argue that migration has many causes, and that climatic variability is just one of several factors that explain migration. The Foresight Report adopts this kind of reasoning, as does a recent United Nations University study (Warner et al., 2012), which examines the conditions under which households use migration to mitigate risks associated with rainfall variability.

As an adaptive strategy, migration is often unavailable to the most vulnerable, which has led some to argue that large populations will be trapped by climatic variability and exposed to danger (Black et al., 2011), especially if the global average temperature increases by 4°C (Gemenne, 2011b). This unequal access to migration as an adaptive strategy raises wider empirical questions about how issues of poverty, marginalisation and inequality affect adaptive strategies such as migration.

Policy responses to climate change and migration remain difficult to design in the absence of a consistent terminology and robust empirical research, and confusion about numbers and pathways. Following some early attempts to create a specific status for climate refugees in international law, proposals to revise the 1951 Geneva Convention or devise a specific climate change displacement treaty (Biermann and Boas, 2010) have given way to more policy-oriented discussions (McAdam, 2011). Many of these discussions have taken place within the framework of the international negotiations on climate change (Warner, 2011). A significant milestone was reached in 2010 with the adoption of paragraph 14(f) of the Cancun Adaptation Framework agreed at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) 16 in Cancun, Mexico. This commits parties to develop "measures to enhance and improve understanding, co-ordination and co-operation with regard to climate change-induced displacement, migration and planned relocation, where appropriate, at national, regional and international levels". Paragraph 14(f) is indicative of a conceptual shift. While migration was generally considered as a failure to adapt to climate change impacts, it is now increasingly recognised as a powerful adaptation strategy.

A number of international organisations have taken steps to address the issue and develop policy measures, including the International Organization for Migration, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Asian Development Bank. More recently, the governments of Norway and Switzerland have launched the Nansen Initiative, an intergovernmental consultation process aimed at defining a global protection agenda. The African Union has adopted the Kampala Convention for the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons in Africa, which acknowledges those displaced because of environmental changes. However, to date, no universal legal regime exists to address the protection gaps for those who have relocated or may need to relocate due to climate change. Obstacles to migration remain extremely important, and large vulnerable populations remain trapped in highly vulnerable regions. In the absence of a global solution, it is likely that most policy responses will remain regional and humanitarian in nature.

Those who face potential displacement by climate change – especially those who live on small, low-lying islands – are often portrayed as the human faces of climate change, the canaries in the coalmine or early-warning systems of global warming (Gemenne, 2011b; Farbotko, 2010). The term "climate refugee" is regularly used to describe a person who will need to relocate as a result of climate change. However, the term has no formal legal designation or meaning. Instead, it is mainly used as a rhetorical device to sensitise governments to the need to address climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. A growing number of scholars now argue that the term "climate refugee" is a social construct. Some have used post-colonial theory to show how so-called "climate refugees" are constructed through Eurocentric systems of power and knowledge (Farbotko, 2010) and are subordinate to Western institutions. Other researchers observe that climate refugees are frequently portrayed as both threats and victims (Baldwin, 2013), and warn that using such crisis-laden language may result in the militarisation or securitisation of climate change policy (Hartmann, 2010). Some theorists argue that climate change-induced migration must be reframed as an issue of development, governance and adaptation in order to counter arguments that favour militarism and security approaches (White, 2011).

Recent critiques echo many of these concerns about the socially constructed nature of the climate refugee and climate change-induced migration. The claim is sometimes made that public concern about climate refugees expresses a desire for security and is often

xenophobic (Bettini, 2013). It has also been said that the use of apocalyptic images of so-called climate refugees to gain political support for climate change measures may have the paradoxical effect of limiting public debate on climate change-induced migration. Other research cautions that the discourse of climate change-induced migration is constructed using racialised language, and suggests that scholars need to be aware of this in order to properly analyse the politics of climate change and migration (Baldwin, 2013).

## Conclusion

The foregoing synopsis covers only a fraction of the social sciences literature on climate change-induced migration. However, this literature points to the idea that environmental and climate-induced migration is both an empirical reality and a political construct. Its empirical quality is evident in the various future-conditional knowledge practices that produce it, practices that include scenario forecasting and stochastic modelling. But its constructed nature is evident in the way that it exists as a speculative, virtual phenomenon. Consequently it remains a paradox for researchers and policymakers. As migration becomes more visible in climate change policy, it is essential that we expand our understanding of the phenomenon as an empirical reality and a political construction, and try to appreciate the social, political, cultural and economic implications of this paradox.

To better appreciate our understanding of the phenomenon, we propose several areas for further investigation.

- Researchers need to better understand the empirical contours of the phenomenon. This means developing sophisticated quantitative methods and modelling techniques, including agent-based modelling.
- It is necessary to build on the strong body of ethnographic research that seeks to identify the field-level complexities involved in migration decisions.
- Researchers also need to understand the constructed nature of this phenomenon. We propose more research on the political economy and history of climate change-induced migration, as well as research on how the equity and identity dimensions of this migration intersect with wider issues of ethnicity, gender and age.

Research on environmental and climatic migration is still a niche area. However, at its heart there are deep issues concerning the relationship between people and their environments. Understanding this relationship should be a top priority for research if we are to understand the social dimensions of climate change properly.

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**Andrew Baldwin** is a lecturer in the Department of Geography, Durham University, United Kingdom, and chair of COST Action IS1101 on Climate Change and Migration.

**François Gemenne** is FNRS senior research associate at the University of Liege, associate professor at the University of Versailles and associate expert at Sciences Po, Paris. His research focuses primarily on populations displaced by environmental change and on climate change adaptation policy.

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