Foreword

Climate change is an obsession of our times, and with good reason. We will suffer the consequences for centuries to come.

Migration has always been a normal way for humanity to cope with stress: whether political, economic, social or environmental stress. Humankind is a migratory animal species and we have for millions of years been wandering the planet searching for greener pastures.

Environmental migration is frequent in recent history. Fleeing the vicinity of an erupting volcano or the disruption of an earthquake is only normal. Migration resulting from slow onset events such as desertification and increased salination of fields due to more numerous or ferocious typhoons is more unpredictable, as some people will move out quickly while others will persist and adapt, sometimes through generations.

Man-made climate change adds a layer of complexity to this picture. Migrants from the Sahel have always been considered as economic migrants, i.e. persons who wanted to improve their economic opportunities, considering the hardship they faced at home. It is only recently that they have also been labelled environmental migrants, and even more recently “climate change migrants”.

Actually, apart from the very specific number of inhabitants of islands which will be partially or entirely under water within a half-century, it is difficult to identify a “climate-change-induced migrant” and distinguish it from other economic migrants, as migrations are always a multifaceted phenomenon, with complex and multi-layered patterns and very personalized scenarios.

Benoît Mayer’s book is seminal, as it tries to disentangle the complex use of language around migration and climate change. There has been some enthusiasm in labelling “climate migrants” without much rigour in how those were to be identified or even why they should be. The issue of what specific legal framework or frameworks, if any, should attach to this category is never made clear by the proponents of the concept. There cannot, therefore, be simple “solutions” such as a status of “climate refugees”, even if there was a political will.

Following a very productive interdisciplinary approach, this book interconnects migration studies, climate studies, international relations
theories (especially norm entrepreneurship), political science literature, as well as findings from diverse other social sciences.

Taking advantage of an in-depth knowledge of the climate change science, the book recognizes the complexity of the climate change–migration nexus, tries to unpack the concept of “climate migration” and to rigorously deconstruct the political arguments made about it. The concept appears to be used in support of different, often conflicting arguments, such as for instance humanitarian assistance, the human rights of migrants, climate change mitigation, or state security. The analysis clarifies that, beyond its power to stimulate political mobilization, and except in very specific circumstances, the concept of “climate migration” is unhelpful as the basis for policy-making and legislation, as it does not yield a precise enough legal category. It also delineates a future for this concept, as migration may manifestly become an appropriate adaptation strategy in how to cope with the worse effects of climate change. In that sense, there is a need for States to develop practical responses to stress situations that are aggravated by man-made climate change and for which internal and international migration may be the best options.

Relating “climate migration” to broader issues in global governance – such as unfulfilled humanitarian assistance needs, ineffective protection of migrants’ human rights, and excessive environmental externalities of industrial nations – this book emphasizes the need to develop new perspectives on international cooperation among growingly interdependent States.

We must thank Benoît Mayer for this intellectually dynamic analysis, which lays the ground for years of in-depth research on the many issues uncovered.

François Crépeau